

GO UP LIKE A WALL

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CONTENTS

Introduction

- Chapter 1 – The Golden Opportunity
- Chapter 2 – Taking Attendance
- Chapter 3 – Rebuilding the Altar
- Chapter 4 – Dreams Fulfilled and Dreams Shattered
- Chapter 5 – A Fake Redemption?
- Chapter 6 – Introduction to Chagai
- Chapter 7 – God Explains Himself
- Chapter 8 – Getting the Message
- Chapter 9 – A Prophecy Like No Other
- Chapter 10 – The Mystery Behind Who Returned
- Chapter 11 – The Future Is Now...Or Later
- Chapter 12 – The Opportunity Wanes
- Chapter 13 – Chagai's Final Address
- Chapter 14 – Returning Like a Wall
- Chapter 15 – Will the Prophets Live Forever?
- Chapter 16 – Redemption As Compensation
- Chapter 17 – Reaching Out to the Exiles
- Chapter 18 – Hashem Cleanses the Sins
- Chapter 19 – My Servant, the Blossom
- Chapter 20 – A Final Message to Zerubavel
- Chapter 21 – Dropping a Bomb on Bavel
- Chapter 22 – A Donation from the Exiles
- Chapter 23 – The Dilemma of the Exiles
- Chapter 24 – The Siege of Jerusalem
- Chapter 25 – Love and Rebuke for the Sinful Zionists
- Chapter 26 – Filthy Bread
- Chapter 27 – Wearing God Out
- Chapter 28 – Land for Peace
- Chapter 29 – Military Service
- Chapter 30 – Take the Gift
- Chapter 31 – The Miracle That Didn't Happen
- Chapter 32 – Selected Lessons from the Midrash

Introduction

We live in exciting and traumatic times. Perhaps that could be said of any generation, but some times are more exciting and traumatic than others. The optimists among us can easily support the claim that this is the most blessed period of Jewish history in thousands of years, and that it will only get better. The pessimists among us can point to unfathomable assimilation and mind-boggling capitulation of the Israeli government to our enemies (especially those who come dressed as “friends”) to claim that we are in serious trouble.

Both of them are absolutely right. This is why the realists among us are torn with mixed feelings about the State of Israel and the state of our people.

To further complicate matters, we are suffering from a bankruptcy of reliable spiritual leadership like perhaps never before in our history. A bankruptcy of reliable political leadership is tragic, yet a secondary concern and something we have grown accustomed to. But spiritual leadership is an IV line to the heart of our people, something that has kept our pulse beating faithfully in the darkest of times. A vacuum in that area can only bode frightening things.

It is easy for the common person to excuse himself for not “doing more”, to concern himself with the spiritual needs of himself and those close to him and let God figure out the larger problems. After all, what can he realistically do to influence the policies of the Israeli government? To subdue our enemies? To educate and inspire the masses? Outside of writing a letter to the editor or some politician’s secretary (neither of which will change the course of history, sorry to divulge), very little.

Yet the prospect of sitting back and being washed along the tide of history as a spectator is anathema to those whose hearts beat with Jewish pride and whose dreams of Jewish destiny feel tantalizingly within reach. If only we knew what to **do**. If only we had some divine inspiration, some spiritual guidance we could rely upon. If only we had a prophet relaying the word of God and His expectations for us.

Thankfully, we do.

The prophets no longer live among us, but their words remain. Their words beat with Jewish pride and proclaim that the dream of Jewish destiny is in fact tantalizingly within reach, right now. If we listen.

Tragically, the words of the prophets largely fell on deaf ears when they were first spoken, and the prophets were persecuted and even murdered for proclaiming the word of God. Our people have suffered for thousands of years because of this crime that seems unfathomable to us “religious” people. Yet now we have another opportunity, eerily similar to the opportunity given our ancestors who failed.

Will we listen? Will we finally get it right?

The prophets speak.

Chapter 1 The Golden Opportunity

Imagine that the world’s most powerful gentiles declared in front of the world that God had instructed them to take the Jews out of exile and return them to the Land of Israel. Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin, the leaders of the European Union and Asia all join together with one voice. Any Jew who wishes to return to the Land of Israel is encouraged to do so, for the purpose of resettling the land and building the Beit Hamikdash. All expenses paid.

Gentiles worldwide send generous donations to insure that no Jew would be left behind, and that the rebuilding could commence without delay. Furthermore, the Vatican opens its secret vaults and voluntarily returns all ancient Jewish artifacts in its possession, to be used in the new Beit Hamikdash.

If such a seemingly ludicrous event occurred, we would expect world Jewry to embrace it as a clear sign of the ultimate redemption. Even the most skeptical among us would be forced to recognize God's intervention in swaying the hearts of the nations. Even the most materialistic among us would be gripped by spiritual inspiration and pack his bags immediately.

What would you say if I told you this actually happened?

What would you say if I told you this actually happened, **except** for the part about world Jewry embracing the opportunity? The hard part, getting the nations of the world to roll out the red carpet for a return to Zion, was accomplished, but the easy part, getting the Jews to accept the offer, proved insurmountable?

Crazy, right? Crazy, but true.

"God awakened the spirit of Koresh, King of Persia, and he announced in all his kingdom, as well as in writing, as follows:

"So says Koresh, King of Persia: All the kingdoms of the land have been given to me by Hashem, God of the heavens, and He appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, that is in Judea. Whoever is among you from all His nation: his God be with him, and he shall go up to Jerusalem, that is in Judea, and build the house of Hashem, God of Israel. He is the God that is in Jerusalem. And as for any [Jew] who remains from all the places in which he dwells [due to poverty], the men of his place shall lift him up with silver, gold, property, and animals, along with the donation to the house of God that is in Jerusalem." (Ezra 1:1-4)

We would expect this unlikely narrative to continue with millions of Jews immediately packing their bags and joyously returning to Israel. Nary a soul would remain behind in the Diaspora.

Unfortunately, the very next verse reveals the first fissure in this potentially utopian story.

"Then arose all the heads of households of Judah and Benjamin, and the Kohanim and Leviim, along with all whom God awakened his spirit to go up to build the house of God in Jerusalem."

This is a far cry from everyone. In fact, as we shall see, it was a rather paltry slice of the Jewish community that had just been offered an all-expense paid trip back to Jerusalem under the royal order of the most powerful man in the world. Even those who answered the call were not entirely self-motivated, but aroused by the same divine spirit that moved Koresh to make his proclamation. The same divine intervention that propelled the Persian King to sponsor the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash was required to get the Jews themselves to participate!

The narrative continues by relating that the gentiles strengthened the *olim* with wealth and donations for the Beit Hamikdash. Koresh also returned to the Jews the thousands of gold and silver instruments that were seized from the first Beit Hamikdash by his predecessor, Nevuchadnetzar. This was no empty gesture. This was the ultimate redemption.

At least, it could have been.

Chapter 2 Taking Attendance

The beginning chapters in the Book of Ezra seem positive on the surface, describing the *aliya* from the Diaspora and the gradual rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash. However, there is a disturbing undercurrent throughout the narrative that indicates fault lines from the earliest stages of this seemingly triumphant return to the Land of Israel. We noted how merely five verses into the narrative there are indications of a lack of enthusiasm among most of Diaspora Jewry at this incredible opportunity.

These indications are validated in Chapter 2 of Ezra, which enumerates those who took advantage of this opportunity at redemption, down to the camels and donkeys they brought along with them. From a nation that is supposed to be more difficult to count than the stars of the sky, only a small percentage was interested in leaving an exile that was no longer forced upon them.

The grand total: 42,360.

That's far less than the average number of residents in one square mile of Manhattan.

That's far less than the number of residents in a medium sized city in modern Israel.

Who were these 42,360 pioneers? What motivated them to return to Israel above all those who stayed behind? What was their spiritual makeup? How much faith did they have in Hashem?

The answers to these questions will provide tremendous insight into this remarkable chapter in Jewish history – and into our own.

Chapter 3 Rebuilding the Altar

Chapter 3 continues the celebratory description of the return to Zion, while also continuing the disturbing indications that things are not unfolding the way they should be.

At the start of the new year the Jews gather to Jerusalem in complete unity – reminiscent of the way we gathered at Har Sinai to receive the Torah. At this point two important figures are introduced: Yehoshua, the *Kohen Gadol*, and Zerubavel, the governor of Jerusalem. These two represent the spiritual and political leaders of the new settlement. In fact, Zerubavel is a direct descendant of King David, making him eligible to be promoted to a far higher political position if circumstances develop favorably...

Verse 2 relates that Yehoshua and Zerubavel, together with their fellow *Kohanim* and other leaders, arise and rebuild the altar to offer sacrifices in accordance with the Torah of Moshe. The text notes the participation of their subordinates to emphasize the consensus in taking what might seem like a daring and controversial action. The verse also emphasizes that they acted in accordance with *Toras Moshe* – an objective stamp of approval. Indeed, Ralbag notes that we learn from here that we may offer sacrifices on the altar even in absence of a Beit Hamikdash, as it had yet to be rebuilt.

This must call into question the indifference and even opposition of the overwhelming majority of world Jewry toward the notion of rebuilding the altar in modern Jerusalem. Those who favor the idea are dismissed as religious extremists and dangerous zealots to be held at bay by more “moderate” and “responsible” folks. Even leaving aside the nauseating, moralist hand-wringing over slaughtering an animal to be offered as a sacrifice, it is almost universally accepted that we cannot entertain the idea of offering a sacrifice when doing so would elicit condemnation from the *goyim*.

Of course, the fact that everything we do or don't do is liable to elicit condemnation from the *goyim* is rejected as a reason to dismiss these concerns. Taking such a bold, proud, authentic Jewish action as rebuilding the altar would *really* elicit condemnation, and therefore the idea must be shelved until some unforeseen time that is approximately never. Whatever the Jews did back then – well, good for them.

Verse 3 provides remarkable insight into the mentality of the people and the fragility of the entire enterprise. It states that the people built the altar “because the fear of the nations of the lands was upon them”. Ibn Ezra and Metzudat David explain that they hurried to build the altar so that the spiritual merit of the sacrifices would aid them against their enemies.

Rashi provides an even more remarkable interpretation. He says that the Jews were afraid that their neighbors, those who occupied the Land of Israel and did not welcome the return of the Jews, would slander them to the King. Therefore they rushed to build the altar to demonstrate that they were acting under royal authority – after all, how else would they dare take such an action? Essentially, they rebuilt the altar not due to some spiritual inspiration, but to create facts on the ground!

Both explanations throw cold water on the contemporary argument that taking similar actions will infuriate our enemies (and our “friends”). Our ancestors understood quite well that they were not welcome by those occupying Eretz Yisrael and that they needed to seize the initiative. Whether their primary goal was to achieve greater heavenly assistance (Ibn Ezra and

Metzudat David) or to send a strong message to their enemies (Rashi), they understood that making a decisive claim to their land would strengthen the settlement enterprise, not weaken it.

Compare and contrast once again to modern times, when taking bold, authentic Jewish actions is portrayed as harmful to Israel's interests, while cowardice is perversely declared to be strength.

Anyone who claims that the challenges faced by Israel today are more difficult and complex than we have ever faced before has never studied the Book of Ezra. Or perhaps he simply lacks faith that the same God who supported them stands behind us today, waiting for us to once again seize the initiative.

Chapter 4 Dreams Fulfilled and Dreams Shattered

Chapter 3 of the Book of Ezra concludes with two astounding verses in which the disturbing undercurrent suddenly erupts to the surface like lava out of a volcano. The preceding verses describe the laying of the foundation of the Beit Hamikdash – the apex of the new *yishuv* to date. The *Kohanim* are appointed with their holy garments, the *Leviim* lead a celebratory rendition of *Hallel*, and the rest of the nation responds with joyous praise to Hashem.

This was it. This was the first flowering of the ultimate redemption, which would be followed by the complete restoration of the Beit Hamikdash, the belated return of those who remained in exile, a miraculous, decisive defeat of those who would necessarily try to thwart us, followed by happily ever after. Surely this was the vision of many at this glorious ceremony who sang *Hallel* and shouted with joy.

Yet the final two verses in Chapter 3 immediately shatter this vision, and it is never the same after that.

“And many of the elder *Kohanim*, *Leviim*, and heads of families who saw the first Beit Hamikdash cried with a great voice when they saw the founding of this Beit Hamikdash, while many raised their voices with shouts of joy. And the people could not discern the sound of the shouts of joy due to the sound of the crying of the people, for although they shouted a great shout [of joy] the sound [of the crying] was heard at a great distance.”

It is a uniquely Jewish response that when the foundation of the Beit Hamikdash was placed they could not decide whether this was a moment of euphoria or heartbreak!

The young people celebrated, for this was indeed the greatest moment of their lives, and, as far as they could tell, the beginning of the fulfillment of their greatest dreams. The return from exile was never more real. How could they not celebrate?

Yet the elders had seen the first Beit Hamikdash, survived 70 years of bitter exile, and made the arduous journey back home. These wizened Jews gazed at the foundation of this new structure and already sensed that it would not compare to the Beit Hamikdash of their youth. They had returned to Eretz Yisrael expecting a complete redemption, but they were suddenly hit with the realization that this would be, at least to them, a cheap substitute. Their hearts were ripped out from them while the young people sang *Hallel*.

The text in the Book of Ezra does not decide for us which perspective, if any, is “right” or “wrong”. But it does make an objective statement that at this point seems impossible: the mourning of the elders drowns out the celebration of everyone else and is heard at a great distance.

We can readily accept that some old grumps find something to complain about as a new generation begins to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash; what else is new?

But for their cries of mourning to overwhelm, to completely drown out the celebration of the return to Zion? How is that possible??

The answer will shed a new light on this critical chapter of Jewish history . . . and a glaring spotlight on ours.

Chapter 5 A Fake Redemption?

The redemptive glory lasts for three verses, a fleeting taste of what might have been, before the narrative veers sideways on a different path. At the start of Chapter 4 the enemies of the Jews come dressed as friends and approach Zerubavel, asking to participate in the building of the Beit Hamikdash. Of course this is nothing more than a sinister attempt to thwart the project one way or another from within.

Zerubavel deflects their request, whereupon they openly harass and intimidate the Jews. They even hire “advisors” to assist in their efforts. Metzudat David explains that these were paid lobbyists to swing the king’s policies against the Jews. (Today’s version of the play would refer to them as lobbyists, anyway.)

The enemies escalate their propaganda war by sending a letter to the new king, Artachshasta, accusing the Jews of plotting to revolt against Persia once Jerusalem is rebuilt. Artachshasta accepts this slander and orders the rebuilding to be ceased.

An indefinite building freeze is imposed.

Thereby the resettlement of the Land of Israel that had seemed so promising, so glorious, just a short time ago was now in danger of collapsing altogether. For eighteen years the situation remains unchanged, and the Jews who made *aliya* while most of the nation stayed behind start to rethink those dreams of redemption. They turn their attention to building the nascent “*medina*” of sorts instead, planting fields and starting businesses. They get used to the idea of plodding on without those perhaps childish dreams of rebuilding the Beit Hamikdash and ushering in the redemption.

In short, reality sets in.

Then God speaks to them.

Chapter 6 Introduction to Chagai

The first four chapters of the Book of Ezra set the stage for the words of Chagai, Zecharya, and Malachi, the last of the prophets. In these short chapters we witnessed unmistakable divine intervention in returning Diaspora Jewry to their homeland, with all the elements in place for this to blossom into the ultimate redemption.

Yet from the very beginning there were disturbing signs that this would not be the ultimate redemption – perhaps not even a redemption at all. The vast majority of Diaspora Jewry passed up the opportunity to return to Eretz Yisrael, and the small group who did return encountered continuous resistance from the foreigners who occupied the land. The laying of the foundation of the Beit Hamikdash was small in the eyes of most of the returnees, who viewed the event as a heartbreaking disappointment. Shortly thereafter their enemies succeeded in convincing the King to impose a building freeze. Now the entire “redemption” seemed like a fetus about to be aborted.

Some vital questions emerge from this series of events:

1) What was God’s intention in all of this? Was this meant to be the ultimate redemption, or a partial redemption, or something else entirely?

2) What was the purpose of the second Beit Hamikdash?

3) What was the spiritual condition of the Jews in Israel? Did they have faith in God? Were they righteous? Why were they more motivated to return than the millions who stayed behind in exile?

4) As we will see, Chagai’s prophecy is ambiguous. Is God criticizing the people or encouraging them? If the former, on what grounds? What more could be expected of them? If the latter, why did He wait so long, after all their frustrations and 18 years of a building freeze?

The Malbim has a mind-blowing introduction to the Book of Chagai, in which he addresses many of these questions. He writes as follows:

“Rav Yitzchak Abarbanel has already explained, and I have seen evidence of this in many places, that from the time of the initial exile [of the Ten Tribes] by Sancherev, the [potential] time of the ultimate redemption began. For from that time the prophets prophesied about the redemption, and it was held in the balance; if they merited they would have been redeemed immediately in the days of Chizkiya or the days of Yoshia (see Tzefanya Chapter 3). But after they didn’t merit it they were exiled to Bavel to expiate their sins.

“However, Hashem saw that if they remained in the Babylonian exile they would have assimilated among the *goyim* and would have completely left the religion – for they had already intermarried with the nations and forgotten their language and their Torah. Therefore He delivered them in a small way through Koresh, and brought them back with the Men of the Great Assembly, and they restored the Torah to its former glory.

“[He did this] even though that time was not yet the time of the ultimate redemption, as Daniel saw four empires ruling over the Jews, as did many other prophets, and he was informed in a vision that the time of the wondrous end of days was very distant. In spite of this there was the possibility that this would become the time of the redemption if they returned in full repentance to Hashem and all made *aliya* like a wall [en masse]. As the Sages say, “The Jews should have had a miracle performed for them in the days of Ezra [as in the past] . . . but their sins prevented it”, and many Midrashim indicate this as well.

“When the Beit Hamikdash was built there was still the possibility hanging in the balance. If they would have returned in repentance, Zerubavel would have been the King Messiah, and the Beit Hamikdash would have been God’s permanent dwelling. Therefore, He once again shined for them the light of prophecy through the latter prophets, Chagai, Zecharya, and Malachi, who stood at that time and awakened them regarding the building and repentance. They revealed to the people the secret that everything depended on them.

“After the people did not merit, the second Beit Hamikdash became just a temporary *mikdash* for that time, and was destined to be destroyed by the Romans, and it lacked five things, as the Sages expound on the word “v’eh’kavda” [Chagai 1:8].

“In the days of Koresh the first, a deliverance was given that they could return to Eretz Yisrael. They started to build the Beit Hamikdash, but were stopped by the enemies of Judah and Benjamin until the time of Darius, for this was not yet the time for it to be rebuilt. Therefore [not knowing this] they despaired of building it, because they did not receive further permission to build.

“Chagai prophesied in the name of Hashem that they should begin to build and not wait for permission, for the time had come. These words were said to Zerubavel, since if they merited and this became the true redemption, the horn of the House of David would blossom and Zerubavel would be the Messiah.

“But when they failed to merit, Zerubavel returned to Bavel and died there. This blossoming is destined to come from his descendants at the end of days. . .”

The Malbim makes several astounding points:

The period of exile did not begin with the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash, but with the exile of the ten tribes by Assyria. From that moment in time the clock began ticking for the ultimate redemption to occur. Indeed, at least two exceedingly righteous kings were in line to be the Messiah if the nation was sufficiently worthy. (See also Malbim on Yeshaya 11:1.)

The period of Chizkiya, when this exile occurred, was particularly ripe for the ultimate redemption, as all the necessary elements were in place. Potential Messiah? Check. Beit Hamikdash? Check. Much of the Jewish population in Israel? Check. Cataclysmic event that could qualify as the war of Gog and Magog? Check. (Indeed, a great deal of the Book of Yeshaya is devoted to the siege of Jerusalem by the massive Assyrian army and their miraculous destruction in a single night. This could have been “it”.)

But the people failed to seize the opportunity, and the moment was lost. History continued on a different, downward track, the ultimate redemption was deferred, and the clock continued to

tick until the next opportunity would be presented. Ultimately, it became necessary for the remaining Jews to be exiled to Bavel (which also occurred in stages, each of which could have been averted).

The key point is that prolonged exile was never a necessity. The steady downward spiral of Jewish history could have been turned around at numerous key junctures and blossomed into the end of days right then and there.

Once the exile was complete following the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash, most of the key ingredients for the ultimate redemption were no longer in place. Consequently, opportunities to get “back on track” would be less frequent and more difficult to come by.

Hashem’s plan at this point was for the exile to expiate the enormous sins of the nation compiled over hundreds of years, shake them up, and inspire repentance, all of which would slowly lead to a new opportunity for redemption.

But something went horribly wrong. Instead of repenting, the Jews began to assimilate – and fast! In the short span of 70 years, intermarriage became rampant, much of the nation no longer spoke their ancestral language, and the Torah was in danger of being utterly lost.

Hashem had no choice but to deviate from the original plan and take an emergency measure: return the Jews to their homeland and restore the spiritual lifeblood of the people through the Beit Hamikdash and the Men of the Great Assembly. This was not intended to be the ultimate redemption, as the people certainly did not merit it, but an emergency interruption of the exile to recharge their spiritual batteries.

However, this created a unique opportunity for the Jews to achieve redemption through the back door. After all, the necessary ingredients for the ultimate redemption were once again in place! Beit Hamikdash? Check. Potential Messiah? Check. Cataclysmic events? Certainly possible at any time.

If the Jews roused themselves at this critical juncture **and returned to Israel en masse**, they could have essentially cheated the exile process and ushered in the Messianic period – even though this was not Hashem’s intention at the outset! Hashem even restored prophets to the nation, who exhorted them to seize this special opportunity.

Even after the initial disappointing wave of *aliya*, the Jews could have returned following the completion of the Beit Hamikdash and ushered in the Messianic period. **It was all dependent on them.**

But when the Jews failed to seize the opportunity, the opportunity finally expired, and the period of the second Beit Hamikdash reverted to what it was originally intended to be: a recharging of the spiritual batteries to prepare the nation for a prolonged exile. The potential Messiah himself died in exile, and the potential redemption was kicked down the road yet again.

The reader should already feel goose bumps from the numerous, eerie parallels to modern times. If we stopped right here there would be enough food for thought to make one’s head spin.

But this is only an introduction to the Book of Chagai. Let us examine the book itself.

Chapter 7 God Explains Himself

“In the second year to King Darius, in the sixth month on the first day of the month, the word of God came through Chagai the prophet to Zerubavel son of She’altiel, governor of Judah, and to Yehoshua son of Yehotzadak, the Kohen Gadol, as follows. So says the God of Hosts: This nation has said that the time has not come, the time for the house of God to be built.” (Chagai 1:1-2)

This is the extent of God’s initial message to the leaders, a simple informational statement that was probably no revelation to them. The commentaries therefore take it a step further and see in these words either an educational message or a subtle rebuke.

Rashi, Metzudat David, and Rav Yosef Kara take the former approach; the people wrongly assumed that the decree of 70 years until the Beit Hamikdash could be rebuilt began with the

exile in the days of Yehoyakim. This preceded the destruction of Jerusalem by 18 years. Indeed, 70 years from that time Koresh invited the Jews to return to Israel, but the 70-year clock to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash actually began ticking with the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash. This is why their initial attempt to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash was thwarted and ultimately delayed for 18 years.

Hashem is therefore informing the leaders that their frustrations were not due to the redemption being an illusion, as they had come to believe, but because they simply misunderstood the timetable. They should relay this information to the people, and encourage them to try once again, for now they will be successful.

Radak takes the latter approach, and makes a remarkable observation in the process. He writes that these words are critical of the people for not realizing on their own that the 70-year timetable must have begun from the time of the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash. He then writes as follows:

“They should have known that God did not bring them back from the exile for nothing. Even though the prophet had not yet told them [to build] they should have started on their own and to wake up regarding the matter. After all, they saw that their endeavors were not succeeding, as it is written, ‘You have planted much [but brought home little]’, and they should have known that this was their punishment for giving up on building the Beit Hamikdash. When Hashem saw that they were not waking up on their own, he sent them [a message] through Chagai the prophet.”

According to Radak, Hashem expected the people to realize on their own that it was His will for them to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash. They should have understood that their return to Israel served a larger purpose and striven to fulfill that purpose – even after initially being stymied by their enemies. Hashem expected them to connect the dots on their own, and only sent a prophet to push them when they failed to do so.

Those who insist that the modern-day return to Israel – which is so much greater in scope – is anything other than God's will, with a similar larger purpose in mind, have no leg on which to stand. Furthermore, those who claim that we must paralyze ourselves until a voice from Heaven instructs us are similarly mistaken. Like our predecessors, we might be initially stymied by our enemies because the time is not yet here, but we have no right to abstain from trying. And we certainly have no right to lose sight of the larger purpose in the return to Israel – and actively strive to fulfill that purpose.

*

“And the word of God came through Chagai the prophet as follows. Is this the time for you to sit in your homes, covered, while the house [of God] is destroyed? And now, so says the God of Hosts: Set your hearts to your ways. You have planted much but have brought home little. You eat but are not satisfied. You drink but do not enjoy it. You dress in [warm] clothing but are not warm. And one who turns a profit has his profit go to a pocket with holes.” (Verses 3-6)

In his first prophecy directly to the people, Chagai once again does not issue an instruction or revelation, but simply calls attention to what is already known. The people have built homes for themselves, but no longer show concern for the continued desolation of the Beit Hamikdash. Chagai then directs their attention to their collective failures, which are entirely unnatural. Whatever they try to accomplish is cursed. Their very clothing fails to warm them, and whatever little profit they acquire is quickly lost.

Practically all the commentators see a clear implication here: the people should have realized on their own that Hashem was sending them a message. Before Hashem issues His instructions to resume building, He essentially takes them to task for requiring a prophet altogether! He expected them to connect the dots and realize that the black cloud which hung over their every pursuit had a spiritual cause – namely, their indifference toward rebuilding the Beit Hamikdash.

Once again, we should all take this message to heart. The absence of prophecy is not a valid excuse for indifference or inaction. It is certainly convenient to have explicit directions from Heaven, but Hashem expects us to collectively discern His will and to act accordingly. Hashem

enlisted Chagai to send explicit directions only as a last resort, because the people had become oblivious.

Rav Yosef Kara veers from this approach in a subtle but very significant way. He writes on verse 6 that as a result of their failures “they were able to know that the time to build had not yet come.” In other words, instead of their failures being a **consequence** of their inaction, they were an indication that Hashem would not yet allow the rebuilding to be successful.

Rav Kara's approach does not fit well with the wording and flow of the chapter, and it is no surprise that later commentaries reject it. But surely Rav Kara recognized that the more obvious interpretation of Chagai's initial message is one of criticism, not education or encouragement. So what compelled him to introduce an interpretation that is such a stretch?

With the background provided by the beginning of the Book of Ezra, it is far more understandable. Who were these people being addressed by Chagai? Were they fat cats who didn't care about the Beit Hamikdash? Weren't these the same people who traveled back to Israel while most of their brethren stayed behind? Didn't they return for the express purpose of rebuilding the Beit Hamikdash, and only ceased when their enemies – backed by the powerful Persian empire – prevailed over them?

Rav Kara softened Chagai's words because he considered it unfair to admonish these people and unreasonable to declare them cursed. They had done all that could be expected of them and had been beaten down. They did not need a prophet to come along and add insult to injury. They needed enlightenment and encouragement. Hence, according to Rav Kara, Chagai is informing them that their frustrations are not a sign that Hashem has rejected them, but merely a sign that the time to build had not yet arrived. It is a message of hope.

While Rav Kara's approach is not the smoothest reading of the chapter, it displays sensitivity for the beleaguered men and women who had to listen to these words firsthand. It personalizes and humanizes the message.

Indeed, while later words of the prophets are indisputably critical of the people, we will find their criticism interlaced with compassion and encouragement as well. Rav Kara goes to an extreme length to find encouragement in this initial message, favoring a difficult reading over a message that strikes him as overly harsh.

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“So says the God of Hosts: Set your hearts to your ways. Go up the mountain, bring wood, and build the house! I will be pleased with it and honored through it, says God.

“You expect [to produce] a lot, but it is little, and whatever you bring home I blow away. Because of what, says the God of Hosts? Because of My house, which is desolate, while you run, each man to his house. Therefore upon you the heavens have held back from giving the dew, and the earth has closed off its produce. And I have called for a drought upon the land, the mountains, the grain, the wine, the oil, and upon whatever the earth would produce; and upon the people, the animals, and all the toil of your hands.” (Verses 7-11)

If the previous verses were at least slightly ambiguous, it seems impossible to interpret these as anything other than harsh criticism for refraining from building the Beit Hamikdash. This is in fact the approach of Rashi and Ibn Ezra.

Yet here this approach is in the minority! Rav Kara continues to interpret these verses as before, that the supernatural failings of the people to that point were merely a sign that the time to build had not yet arrived. The people are not blamed for anything, and are now given clear instructions to build the Beit Hamikdash.

What is startling is that the other commentaries who explained the previous verses as critical now do a 180-degree turn. Radak, Metzudat David – who typically follows Rashi's approach – and Malbim all interpret these verses not as criticism for the past, but as a warning for the future: “If you don't heed this instruction to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash, then your failures and troubles will only intensify.”

This approach requires adding key words to the message, a device a commentator should employ most sparingly. It seems they felt compelled to do so for reasons similar to those of Rav Kara before; the notion of such widespread calamity befalling the *olim* for not violating the building

freeze on their own was just too harsh for these commentators to accept. While they don't give the *olim* as much of a pass as does Rav Kara, as they do interpret the previous verses as critical, they are unwilling to blast the *olim* out of the water. They feel compelled to interpret these verses in a way that is not as clear or straightforward because of the context provided by the Book of Ezra.

Chapter 8 Getting the Message

“And Zerubavel son of Shaltiel, and Yehoshua son of Yehotzadak, the Kohen Gadol, and all the remnant of the people listened to the voice of Hashem their God, and to the words of Chagai the prophet, as Hashem their God sent him, and the people were afraid from before Hashem.” (Verse 13)

We wondered earlier about the spiritual condition of the *olim*. Were they righteous? Did they have faith in Hashem?

Despite taking a lot of punches (according to Rashi and Ibn Ezra), or some punches (Radak, Metzudat David, and Malbim), this verse vindicates them as God-fearing people who could at the very least take criticism and heed a difficult instruction. According to Rav Kara, who obviates all criticism of the people from this chapter, they come out smelling like roses.

We will soon have a startling revelation about the identity of these *olim* that will shed a fascinating light on chapter 1 of Chagai.

But first, Ibn Ezra and Radak provide startling comments of their own on this seemingly benign verse. This is motivated by an apparent redundancy: “the people listened to the voice of God and to the words of Chagai”. These are one and the same, of course.

Ibn Ezra makes the following explosive comment: “They listened to the voice, [meaning] that they were obligated to build the house of God even if [Chagai] did not prophesy to that effect. And furthermore they listened to his words.”

Radak had made a similar comment already on verse 2, and follows suit here as well: “Even though Chagai had not yet prophesied to them, they were responsible to build the Beit Hamikdash. When they saw that their endeavors were not succeeding properly, but ran counter to the nature of the world, they should have examined their actions. This is “the voice of Hashem their God”, for God commanded in the Torah not to go with Him in happenstance. For when bad things befall [the Jews] they should examine their actions, and not say it happened by chance. They further were aroused to build the house by the words of Chagai the prophet whom God sent to them. This is what is said “and to the words of Chagai the prophet”.

These early commentators see here a clear textual indication that the Jews were obligated to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash, in spite of everything going against them. They should have understood that their return to Zion was not for naught, and they shirked their obligation by not being more proactive even without the directions of a prophet. The “voice of God” spoke to them through their experiences and His words in the Torah, and He expected them to understand His will for them to build the Beit Hamikdash through that voice alone.

The voice of God speaks to us no less clearly today, and His expectation for us to understand His will in absence of a prophet has not changed. If we ignore the voice of God, or tune it out, or claim it is not really there, or claim that we have no ability to decipher it, or no right to decipher it . . . there will be consequences.

If nothing else, we will disappoint Hashem by failing to hear His voice. The explicit instructions of a prophet should be a luxury, not a necessity.

Chapter 9 A Prophecy Like No Other

Chapter 1 continues with a verse unlike any other in all of Tanach:

“And said Chagai, the emissary of Hashem, in the message-bearing of Hashem, to the people as follows: I am with you, says Hashem.” (Verse 13)

First of all, could the wording be any more clumsy and redundant? Has Chagai not already been identified? Do we not yet know that he is relaying prophetic messages? And even if this were the first verse in the book, would it be necessary to state that the messenger of Hashem is bringing a message from Hashem?

Again, there is no similar verse anywhere in Tanach.

But it gets even more puzzling. Picture the scene. Chagai summons the Jews to hear his latest prophetic message from God. A large crowd forms and waits with great anticipation for Chagai to speak. The moment finally arrives.

“I am with you, says Hashem.”

Chagai stops speaking. The crowd looks on, waiting for instructions, fearing another round of criticism and dire predictions, wondering what the message will be. After a few moments of utter silence there are murmurs from the crowd.

“Go on!” urges the crowd. “Continue!”

“That’s it,” says Chagai. “Go home.”

One can imagine the Jews grumbling about why they had to stop what they were doing for *that*.

That is, until the message finally sinks in.

“I am with you, says Hashem.”

This is the shortest prophecy of all, yet need anything more be said to this group of beleaguered Jews? After all their travails, after all the criticism they had so far heard (according to all except Rav Kara), and after receiving a frightening instruction to build the Beit Hamikdash against the decree of the Persian Empire, what they needed most of all was a Heavenly arm around the shoulder.

“I am with you, says Hashem.”

If God Himself tells you straight and to the point that He is with you, what do you have to worry about?

We can now understand the clumsy, redundant phraseology of the verse. This message is not exactly profound, and could easily have been mistaken as a mere pep talk from Chagai to boost the morale of the people. After all, not everything a prophet utters is a prophecy. This message in particular could have been spoken by anyone.

The verse thereby emphasizes that when Chagai spoke these words, he was not wearing his “rabbi hat”, but his “prophet hat”. (Indeed, Chagai is mentioned in several places in the Gemara for his *halachic* teachings.) It is one thing for a rabbi to give a *drasha* in which he tells his congregation that Hashem is with them. It is another thing entirely for a prophet to say, “God told me that He is with you.”

Hence the verse emphasizes that this message was spoken by Chagai the prophet, acting as a message-bearer of Hashem.

What a wonderful message, indeed.

Chapter 10 The Mystery Behind Who Returned

“And Hashem roused the spirit of Zerubavel son of Shaltiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Yehoshua son of Yehotzadak, the Kohen Gadol, and the spirit of all the remnant of the nation. And they came and did the work of the house of Hashem, God of Hosts, their God. It was on the 24th day of the 6th month, in year two to Darius the King.” (Verses 14-15)

The narrative continues with the Jews resuming the work to build the Beit Hamikdash. Even after Hashem assured them that He was with them, they still required Hashem to give them strength in the face of their enemies, which only underscores how weak and threatened they felt. Thus concludes chapter 1 of the Book of Chagai.

Before we proceed to chapter 2, we have some unfinished business. We previously discussed the odd scene when the *olim* laid the foundation of the Beit Hamikdash. Much of the crowd celebrated, as we would expect, yet they were completely drowned out by those who mourned the same event. The elders in the group who had seen the first Beit Hamikdash and survived the 70 years of exile were disappointed that the second Beit Hamikdash would be smaller in comparison. While their reaction is understandable, it is difficult to comprehend how the cries of a few old people could drown out the wild celebration of the young.

The following source will blow you away.

After the Beit Hamikdash was rebuilt, a second group of *olim* brought twelve sacrifices, as mentioned in chapter 8 of Ezra. The Gemara (Horayot 6a) infers that these were sin-offerings, and cites a teaching from Rav Yehuda in the name of Shmuel that the sin was idol worship in the final years of the first Beit Hamikdash. The Gemara attempts to determine how it is possible for a group of people to bring a sin-offering for a crime committed by the public of a previous generation. This conflicts with the law that only the one who commits the sin can bring the sin-offering. If the individual designates the animal to be brought, but dies before the sacrifice is offered, the sacrifice can no longer be brought and the animal is put to death.

Rav Papa explains that this principle applies only to sin-offerings brought by an individual, not to those brought by the public. This is because the public cannot die; the sacrifice can therefore be brought at any time by its true "owner". The Gemara then attempts to determine the source for Rav Papa's explanation, and ultimately concludes that this principle is only true when at least some members of the public who actually committed the sin are still present.

The discussion then returns to the twelve sin-offerings brought in the times of Ezra. The Gemara challenges Rav Papa's explanation from this event, assuming that no one who committed the idol-worship was still alive. This challenge is deflected from verse 12 in chapter 3, which states that many people mourned at the laying of the foundation because they were alive at the time of the first Beit Hamikdash. Ergo, some of the very individuals who sinned were still alive, and it was still possible to bring a public sin-offering for that generation.

Now comes one bombshell after another.

The Gemara speculates that perhaps only a minority of the assemblage belonged to the previous generation, in which case they should not have been able to bring the sacrifices. This theory is immediately rejected, based on the fact that the sound of the mourning drowned out the sound of the celebrating. This could have been possible only if a majority of the people there belonged to the previous generation.

Let this fact sink in. Of the 42,360 Jews who returned from exile, **the majority were adults before the exile**. In other words, most of the *olim* were at least in their mid-80's and 90's! And we are not talking about a majority of 50.01%, but a very decisive majority, for their mourning **drowned out the sound of the young people celebrating**.

This revelation sheds enormous light on the entire narrative. Now we can easily understand why the *olim* felt weak and threatened by their enemies. It was not just because of their small overall number, but because the majority of them were well beyond their fighting years.

We can also easily understand why they became dejected and ultimately gave up on the Beit Hamikdash being rebuilt. The overwhelming majority of young people were not interested in returning to Israel. Many of the children and grandchildren of these *olim* stayed behind, and probably considered their elders crazy for giving up the comforts of exile and chasing a foolish dream, those dusty memories of times long past. Indeed, we noted all the way in chapter one of Ezra that it was primarily the heads of households who answered the call to return to Israel. The rest of their households by and large did not join them!

What an incredible shame. What a lost opportunity.

But there is another bombshell in the next line of Gemara. They again challenge how the sin-offerings could have been brought, being that the idol-worship was committed intentionally. That is a capital crime, and the sinners of that generation were deserving of death. A sacrifice is not able to expiate this sin, and cannot be brought.

The Gemara responds with three words: *"hora'at sha'ah hay'ta"*. It was an exceptional ruling for that time alone. Rashi continues: "That even though they sinned intentionally, they would receive atonement."

In other words, the prophets among them understood that Hashem made a unique allowance for them to bring a sacrifice that is otherwise forbidden and entirely ineffective, and essentially granted them a pardon for committing the worst of spiritual offenses prior to the exile.

Consider the ramifications of this. Hashem so badly wanted the second Beit Hamikdash to succeed that He broke His own rules to give these old men a clean slate. They had survived the exile, retained their hope for a better future, and undertaken a difficult, dangerous journey back to Israel to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash – and they did it while their children, those whose energy and fighting ability were sorely needed, laughed at them. That was exceptional. So Hashem did something exceptional for them and forgave the gravest of crimes against Him, right at the inception of the second Beit Hamikdash.

However depressed these people were when the foundation was laid, the weight of the sin that they carried with them all these years being removed as a unique exception must have made up for it many times over. What a powerful message that must have sent, that God truly was with them and yearned for them to succeed.

These messages translate to modern times on so many levels. We too are burdened by sins, guilt, and a long history of falling short. We too can easily look askance at those who founded the modern resettlement of Israel. But for all of their faults, and for all of our own, it should be clear to all that God wants us to succeed, and will assist us if we do our part.

That generation failed. The young people, the overwhelming majority of the nation, ignored the call to return. Our generation has done somewhat better in that regard, yet far too many have continued to ignore the clear signs that God wants the nation to return to its homeland.

That generation failed. Will we?

Chapter 11

The Future Is Now...Or Later

Chapter 2 of Chagai begins with Hashem's response to the dejected elders who cried in disappointment at the laying of foundation for the Beit Hamikdash.

"In the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of Hashem came through Chagai the prophet as follows: Say now to Zerubavel son of Shaltiel, governor of Judah, and to Yehoshua son of Yehotzadak, the Kohen Gadol, and to the remnant of the people as follows:

"Who among you remains that saw this house in its first glory? And how do you see it now? When compared to the first, isn't this like nothing in your eyes?

"Now be strong, Zerubavel, says Hashem, and be strong, Yehoshua son of Yehotzadak, the Kohen Gadol, and be strong, all the people of the land, says Hashem, and do – for I am with you, says the God of Hosts. [Do] that about which I made a treaty with you when you went out of Egypt. My spirit stands amongst you. Don't be afraid." (Verses 1-5)

This message is straightforward. The beginning of the new Beit Hamikdash appeared inadequate to the elders – who we now know were a very significant majority – as it lacked the wealth and glory of the times of David and Shlomo. Hashem urges them to just do what is incumbent on them: be resilient, keep the Torah, and draw support from the spirit of prophecy that had returned to them.

Now things get tricky.

“For so says the God of Hosts: one more, it is small, and I will shake up the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. And I will shake up the nations, and all the wealth of the nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory, says the God of Hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the God of Hosts. The glory of this latter house will be greater than that of the first, says the God of Hosts. And in this place I will give peace, says the God of Hosts.” (Verses 6-9)

These four verses are a change of course for Chagai. Until now he provided “status reports”, encouragement, and instructions. Now, for the first time, he prophesies about the future. But these four verses also present numerous questions:

1) When exactly is this future he is prophesying about? Is it the immediate future, an intermediate future, or a distant future?

2) What in the world is meant by “one more, it is small”, which precedes God shaking up the world?

3) What is meant by this great shake-up?

The meaning of the latter verses is ambiguous as well: What is meant by “this latter house”? In what way will it be greater than the first? To what does this promised “peace” refer?

How these latter verses are to be understood depends on how the first three questions are explained.

This series of ambiguities creates an incredible divergence of opinions among the commentaries.

Rashi understands the fulfillment of this prophecy to be in the intermediate future. “One more, it is small” means that after the reign of Persia expires another empire will rule over them – the Greeks – but their reign will be only for a short time. Hashem will then shake up the world with the miracles He performed in the days of the Hashmonaim. This will cause the nations to recognize that God's presence truly rests in this Beit Hamikdash, and they will pay monetary tribute to the Beit Hamikdash. Hashem can make this happen, because all the gold and silver is really His. The second Beit Hamikdash will be greater than the first either in size or duration (one opinion is that of Rav, the other of Shmuel), as it stood ten years longer than the first.

Rashi's reading is fairly encouraging, as it promises the dejected elders that this house will indeed compare favorably to the first, and there will be a brighter future, though it will take some time.

Rav Yosef Kara explains the verses similarly to Rashi, with two significant differences. “One more, it is small” refers to their current difficulties due to reign of Bavel. This reign will end soon.

Rashi probably departs from this explanation because it does not fit smoothly with the wording. Rav Kara probably prefers this explanation because the message is more relevant and encouraging to the people than to be informed that they would have to endure the reign of another kingdom, if even for a short time.

Rav Kara also explains that the era of peace refers to the time after the victory of the Hashmonaim, whereas the first Beit Hamikdash did not enjoy a peaceful era from the time of the death of Rechavam, son of Shlomo.

Rashi does not explain when this era of peace was to occur, so presumably he agreed with Rav Kara on this point, and their readings would then be almost identical.

Ibn Ezra and Radak present a different interpretation with small variances between themselves. “One more, it is small” means that Hashem will perform another wonder for these people, beyond what He has already done for them, but it is easy for Him to do it. Ibn Ezra says it might alternatively mean that this wonder will happen very soon. This wonder is the shaking up of the nations, and the shaking up of the nations means that they will come from their places to give honor and money to the Beit Hamikdash. They too cite the dispute between Rav and Shmuel to explain the greatness of the second house over the first. Ibn Ezra cites an alternate opinion that this aspect of the prophecy was conditional on the people being fully righteous, and was apparently not fulfilled.

Radak explains that the era of peace refers to most of the period of the second Beit Hamikdash, even though there were many wars during that time.

These commentators present an alternate explanation of “one more, it is small” that makes no mention of future problems, immediate or otherwise, but is entirely positive. This fits more smoothly with the context of the prophecy, though it fits less smoothly with the wording; shaking up the nations definitely has more of a military connotation than one of inspiration, even though the latter is just as cataclysmic.

Metzudat David and Malbim both veer sharply from their predecessors, which always begs an explanation. Our sages do not reject prior interpretations merely to assert their own voice, but only if they find a serious flaw in these interpretations. We shall see what compels them here to go in a completely different direction.

Metzudat David explains as follows: “One more, it is small” refers to the second Beit Hamikdash, which is “one more” after the first, but will only last a short time in history. Hashem will then shake things up by bringing destruction upon the Beit Hamikdash as if the stars themselves are waging war against it. The kings of the land will gather against it with large armies through land and sea.

The second shake-up refers to an even more distant future, when Hashem will rouse the army of Gog to attack Jerusalem prior to the ultimate redemption. These combined armies will bring their wealth with them. At *that* time Hashem will fill the *third* Beit Hamikdash with glory, for those armies will be destroyed, and Israel will plunder their wealth to dedicate to the Beit Hamikdash. This future Beit Hamikdash will be greater than the first one, and at that time Hashem will bring peace to the land.

This interpretation is extremely puzzling for the following reasons:

1) The first part is an incredible downer. No sooner have the *olim* received some good news and encouragement than Chagai comes along and informs them that this Beit Hamikdash – which has not even been fully rebuilt – is doomed. This doesn't fit with the flow of the text, nor can we comprehend what purpose it serves to tell this to the people at this time. The fact that a distant future will be better is not much of a consolation prize to the people hearing these words, either. It is difficult to imagine them continuing to build with much enthusiasm after hearing this.

2) The second part is a complete about-face from the first part, with nothing in the text to indicate this. In addition, it is reading a great deal into the text to interpret verse 6 as referring to an intermediate future, while verses 7-9 suddenly refer to a future thousands of years away.

Metzudat David surely understood these obvious problems with his interpretation. So what compelled him to adopt it?

One simple, inconvenient fact that he simply could not ignore.

Unless most of this prophecy is referring to a distant future, then most of it didn't come true. The various interpretations of Hashem “shaking up the world”, bringing tremendous glory to the Beit Hamikdash, and bringing peace are all somewhat contrived. At best they are technical fulfillments of the prophecy, but they are not especially satisfying – the advertisement sounds a lot better than the actual product.

Metzudat David faced the same two choices as the other commentaries. The first was to apply the text to events that did occur, but which do not nearly match the intensity of the prophecy. In so doing much of the prophecy coming true is a stretch at best, and some elements – such as shaking up the nations and an era of peace – are difficult to argue as having occurred at all. The second choice was to avoid this problem by kicking the can down the road; much of this prophecy wasn't fulfilled only because it wasn't *yet* fulfilled.

In essence, Metzudat David preferred an approach that doesn't fit as smoothly with the text and context over the theological problem of a prophecy not being clearly fulfilled.

Malbim makes a similar strategic choice, albeit with a different interpretation. “One more, it is small” refers to the spirit of prophecy that had been returned to the Jewish people in small measure. Malbim transposes the phrase, and interprets it as “it is small, one more”, to mean that the Jews need to buttress this spirit of prophecy with good deeds to merit an outpouring of

spiritual knowledge. This would usher in the shaking up of the world, the ultimate redemption, and the building of a Beit Hamikdash that would never be destroyed.

Malbim explains that this prophecy was conditional, thereby skirting the theological problem of a prophecy not being fulfilled. It had the *potential* to be fulfilled at that time, but since the people did not merit it, the prophecy was deferred until future times. With this interpretation Malbim is consistent with his introduction to Chagai and to his approach to other seemingly unfulfilled prophecies.

However, Malbim's interpretation of the text is difficult, as a vital element of his interpretation – the spirit of prophecy – is nowhere indicated. In addition, he transposes a key phrase of the text to make his interpretation viable.

On the other hand, his interpretation avoids the theological problem of a prophecy not being fulfilled. It also fits well with the context, as the immediately preceding verses urge the Jews to keep the Torah.

In addition, Malbim's interpretation fits especially smoothly with one difficult phrase that is not addressed by the others: “The glory of this latter house will be greater than that of the first...” The wording should have been “The glory of this house will be greater” or “The glory of the latter house will be greater”. “This latter house” is clumsy and redundant.

According to most of the other commentators, “this latter house” refers to the second Beit Hamikdash, and the difficult wording is overlooked. According to Metzudat David, it refers to the third Beit Hamikdash, and should be read as “this last house”, where the difficulty of the word “this” is overlooked.

According to Malbim, however, this phrase fits perfectly. Since the prophecy is conditional, it could be referring either to the second Beit Hamikdash – this one – or to the third Beit Hamikdash – the last one. The second one *could have been* the last one, but it wound up being only a latter one in relation to the first.

Malbim's interpretation also makes the entire prophecy directly relevant to the people, whereas according to the other interpretations much of the prophecy informs them of an intermediate or distant future that necessarily dooms the second Beit Hamikdash in its infancy.

This prophecy is ambiguous enough to allow for a wide variance of interpretations, all of which have to “pick their poison” of textual difficulties, contextual difficulties, or theological difficulties. It is frustrating to be unable to determine which interpretation – or perhaps interpretations – were intended by Chagai. On the other hand, we can glean fascinating insight into the philosophical principles of the commentators by analyzing why they preferred one vulnerable interpretation over another.

Chapter 12 The Opportunity Wanes

“On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year to Darius, the word of God came through Chagai the prophet as follows. So says the God of Hosts: inquire now of the Kohanim the law, as follows. If a man carries impure meat in the corner of his garment, and it touches with his garment bread, and porridge, and wine, and/or oil, and/or any food, will it become impure? And the Kohanim responded, 'No'.

“And Chagai said, if one who has become impure from the dead touches any of these, will it become impure? And the Kohanim responded, 'Yes.'

“And Chagai replied and said, so is this people, and so is this nation before me, says God, and so is all the work of their hands. And all that they offer there is impure.

“And now, set your hearts from this day forward, before stone is placed to stone in the sanctuary of God. [Understand] from when you came to a pile of grain [anticipating] twenty [measures] but it was ten. [You] came to the wine press to draw fifty measures, but it was twenty. I struck you with blasted crops, and rotten crops, and with hail – all the work of your hands. But you are not [returning] to me, says God.

“Set your hearts from this day forward. From the twenty-fourth day to the ninth month, from the day that the sanctuary of God was laid, set your hearts. Is there still seed in the storehouse? And the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate tree, and the olive tree have yet to bear [fruit]. From this days I will bless [them].” (Verses 10-19)

Chagai is told to test the Kohanim on two very basic laws associated with their service. The first question is ambiguous, which leads to a disagreement over whether or not the Kohanim answered correctly. If they did not, it is to their great shame, and further justifies the sharp criticism which follows. In either case, this test is meant in part so that the word “impure” will segue into the criticism of the people.

The reason for the sharp criticism is also the subject of dispute. Rashi and Metzudat David take the position that the Kohanim erred. Chagai proceeds to blast them and the nation for their ignorance of the Torah, and exhorts them to study more attentively. Otherwise their sacrifices will be impure to God. This approach connects the test with the reason for the criticism.

Radak takes the position that the Kohanim did not err, but they are nevertheless criticized for not pushing the people to build the Beit Hamikdash, and the people are criticized for being lazy about the work. Their sacrifices are rejected by God because the people do not show sufficient concern for His honor by neglecting to build the house. Ibn Ezra concurs with this reason for the criticism. This approach connects the context of the overall book with the reason for the criticism.

Hashem's sharp words conclude by once again exhorting the people to change their ways. There is still time for them to repent and for Hashem to send blessing to their crops from this day forward.

In chapter 1, Hashem similarly criticized the people (although there the reason was indisputably their laxity in building the Beit Hamikdash). The punishment was roughly the same, as was the exhortation to “set their hearts to their ways”. Yet there the prophecy is followed with a positive response from the people. They are afraid before God, they get the message, and they get to work.

A mere three months later this prophecy is delivered in chapter 2. It is not followed with any reaction by the people. They *did* ultimately build the Beit Hamikdash, of course, but there is no indication in the text that the prophecy had the desired effect. One is left with the feeling that this opportunity for ultimate redemption is slipping away.

A mere three months.

Chapter 13 Chagai's Final Address

“And the word of Hashem came a second time to Chagai on the twenty-fourth of the month, as follows. Say to Zerubavel, governor of Judah, as follows. I am going to shake up the heavens and the earth. And I will overturn the throne of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and I will overturn chariots and their riders, and the horses and their riders will fall, man by the sword of his fellow.

“On that day, says the God of Hosts, I will take you, Zerubavel son of Shaltiel, my servant, says God, and I will place you like a signet. For in you I have chosen, says the God of Hosts.” (Verses 20-23)

These verses conclude the Book of Chagai, and are among the most fascinating in the book. Once again we have cataclysmic intonations, this time followed by a strong implication that Zerubavel will be Moshiach. Obviously *this* did not come to pass, so by now we should know roughly what to expect from the commentators.

Rashi equates the first part of the prophecy – the destruction of the power of the nations – with the downfall of the Persian empire. This happened in the 34th year of the second Beit Hamikdash, which is conveniently not too distant, and therefore fairly relevant to the recipient of the prophecy.

Of course, this raises an obvious problem with the second part of the prophecy – the enduring chosen-ness of Zerubavel. Rashi interprets this to refer to a complete undoing of the heavenly decree against Yechonya, the great-grandfather of Zerubavel, that he would never be a “signet”, but would die childless. Yechonya repented, and not only did he have a child, but Zerubavel is exalted by Hashem with the designation of a “signet”. Rashi takes this wording to mean simply that Zerubavel would be exalted and represents the enduring legacy of the Davidic line – but there is no Messianic implication.

Rashi's interpretation avoids the issue of an unfulfilled prophecy, but there is one particular weakness to it: “on that day”. There seems to be no connection between the downfall of the Persian empire and any additional elevation to Zerubavel at that time or at any time.

Radak too keeps the prophecy contemporary, but seeks to better connect Zerubavel's prominence to the downfall of the nations. He explains that Zerubavel's position will not be compromised due to the turmoil in Persia, and in fact he will be greatly elevated. The “signet” implies that Hashem's providence will be upon him continuously.

Once again, there is no Messianic implication, and thus no problem of unfulfilled prophecy. However, we know of no particular events in Zerubavel's life following this message that could validate this interpretation.

Rav Yosef Kara once again equates the downfall of the nations with the defeat of the Greeks by the Hashmonaim. But there is no clear connection between this and the ascendance of Zerubavel. “On that day” is also very problematic, considering Zerubavel was long dead by that time.

Metzudat David is also consistent with his approach earlier in the chapter. According to him, the shaking-up of the heavens and the earth once again refers to the eventual destruction of the second Beit Hamikdash. The next verse, in which Hashem foretells the overturning of the nations, refers to the war in future times, after which Hashem will take a descendant of Zerubavel to be Moshiach. According to this interpretation, the Messianic implications of the text are addressed, and “on that day” fits well with the downfall of the nations.

Once again Metzudat David chooses a more “fulfilling” fulfillment of the prophecies over the smoothest reading. After all, there is no indication that thousands of years separate verses 21 and 22, nor that verse 21 is an extremely negative prophecy that is followed by a consolation. To Metzudat David, such issues are bearable, whereas a prophecy going unfulfilled or explained away is not.

By now we should know how the Malbim will navigate these issues. Zerubavel *could have been* Moshiach, but the generation did not merit it, and thus he remained a governor instead of becoming a king. But that doesn't mean the prophecy went unfulfilled or will go unfulfilled; it was simply deferred to a future time when a descendant of Zerubavel will be Moshiach.

The text chooses its words carefully to allow for this flexibility; Zerubavel is not explicitly called a king or Moshiach, but a signet. That *could* manifest itself with Zerubavel becoming Moshiach, but it could just as well manifest itself with Zerubavel becoming an enduring legacy through Moshiach eventually coming from him.

This final message from Chagai is bittersweet. It encapsulates the triumph, the potential, and, tragically, the missed opportunity of his period. It comes to Zerubavel, the Moshiach-in-waiting, on the same day the people are criticized for being lax with building the Beit Hamikdash and/or ignorant of basic Torah law. Hashem dangles yet another opportunity before them to repent and receive His blessing, but He is becoming exasperated and knows that things just aren't working out.

So Hashem immediately gives Zerubavel the news that the potential is still there in his time, but hints that there may be a long time before the ultimate redemption. The second Beit Hamikdash has still yet to be rebuilt, but it is already time to start planning for the days beyond its destruction. At the very least, Zerubavel is informed that he has an exalted legacy in God's master plan, and his Moshiach-worthy efforts will not be in vain.

Chapter 14 Returning Like a Wall

Before we proceed to the Book of Zecharya, we must address a critical loose end: a loaded phrase used by the Malbim in his introduction to Chagai. The Malbim asserted that the return to Israel was originally intended to recharge the spiritual batteries of the nation to prepare them for prolonged exile, as the spiritual state of the people had rapidly deteriorated to perilous levels in the short span of 70 years. However, this return to Israel brought with it many of the ingredients necessary for the ultimate redemption. This created the potential for the Jews to “cheat” their way out of exile and turn this emergency interruption of the exile into the ultimate redemption.

This potential would have been fulfilled, writes the Malbim, “if they returned in full repentance to Hashem and all made *aliya* like a wall [en masse].” The phrase “making *aliya* like a wall” is a key phrase in a most controversial *drasha*, and is deliberately used by the Malbim to call this *drasha* to mind.

It is found in two places, the Gemara in Kesubot (111a) and the Midrash on Shir HaShirim (2:7, page 32 in the Vilna edition). In the former source it is cited by Rav Zeira in defense of his plan to make *aliya*, which was challenged by Rav Yehuda. Rav Zeira defended himself by saying that it is only forbidden for the Jews to return to Israel “like a wall” (until the time of the redemption). Rashi explains this to mean “en masse, by force.”

In the Midrash on Shir HaShirim this source is cited by Rabbi Chelbo, where the teaching is discussed in more detail. It states as follows:

“Rabbi Yossi bar Chanina said, there are two oaths here, one for Israel and one for the nations of the world. [Hashem] swore regarding Israel that they should not rebel against the yoke of the kingdoms [in their exile], and He swore regarding the nations of the world that they should not place a heavy yoke on Israel. For if they place a heavy yoke on Israel they cause the end to come [before] its designated time...

“Rabbi Chelbo says there are four oaths here [four verses in Shir HaShirim mention an oath]. He swore regarding Israel that they should not rebel against the kingdoms; that they should not force the end [other versions: distance the end {through their sins}]; that they should not reveal their secrets [of the Torah] to the nations of the world; and that they should not go up like a wall from the exile.

“If so, why will the King Messiah come? To gather the exiles of Israel.

“Rabbi Oniah said, the four oaths correspond to four generations that forced the end and stumbled...”

This Midrash is commonly referenced and grossly misinterpreted by numerous supposedly Torah-observant Jews to justify antagonism against modern-day Israel and to discourage Jews from making *aliya*. As is typical of those who engage in agenda-based citations of Torah sources, they conveniently quote only that which – taken in a vacuum – supports their agenda. The rest of the source either doesn't exist, or is interpreted in a way that renders it meaningless – all while they magnify the snippet that suits their agenda out of context and out of proportion. Their agenda is thus branded as inviolable, unquestionable Torah truth, and all who fail to fall into step are branded enemies of the Torah.

Let us examine what the Midrash is really teaching us.

Rabbi Yossi bar Chanina teaches that the period of exile is based on a symbiotic relationship between the Jews and the nations of the world. The Jews are expected to accept the authority of the nations during their exile and remain loyal to their hosts. In return, the nations of the world are expected to refrain from treating the Jews in a heavy-handed fashion.

(I purposely do not write that the Jews and the nations “swore” to do this, as virtually anyone who references this Midrash will phrase it, because that is not consistent with the wording of the Midrash. Who actually took this oath? When did they take it? The Midrash consistently states that Hashem swore regarding others, which is another way of saying that the content of the oaths indicate His definite will. Even those who would claim that some unnamed representatives of the Jewish people literally took such an oath, they would be hard pressed to make this same

claim regarding the nations of the world, and the phraseology is consistent in all cases. The lesson of the Midrash might be the same, but it is far more powerful to be able to claim “the Jews swore not to make *aliya*” than to say “Hashem doesn't want the Jews to return to Israel as a nation under most circumstances”).)

The Yefe Kol commentary spells out the consequences of this relationship between the Jews in exile and their host nations: if the nations treat the Jews in heavy-handed fashion, they will cause the redemption to come before its designated time.

This is an entirely rational concept. The exile is a punishment to expiate the sins of the nation. The duration of the exile is designated, barring certain factors that can either hasten the redemption (such as mass repentance) or, God forbid, delay it (such as mass corruption). One such factor that can hasten the redemption is if the nations of the world oppress the Jews far beyond what is considered “reasonable”. For one thing, oppressing the Jews drastically accelerates the process of expiating the sins of the nation, and therefore reduces the period of exile. In addition, by oppressing the Jews the nations show themselves unworthy of the authority given them, they pile up sins on their own accounts, and they arouse God's love for His nation. (See also Yeshaya 14:1 and Malbim, which is another example of Hashem expressing that He will redeem the Jews out of mercy.)

This concept is universally accepted regarding the redemption from Egypt, which occurred after 210 years (only a relatively small part of which consisted of slavery), as opposed to the 400 years that had been decreed upon the Jews. Hashem factored in the “quality” of the exile to reduce the duration of the exile.

Far from categorically forbidding mass *aliya*, the teaching of Rabbi Yosse bar Chanina strongly indicates that modern Israel is God's will. It is no coincidence that the State was born on the heels of the most heinous oppression of the Jewish people since the destruction of Jerusalem. It is no coincidence that this rather heavy-handed treatment of the Jews precipitated the greatest moment of redemption since the destruction of Jerusalem.

Ideally this redemption would have occurred under more favorable circumstances, but to deny that it was God's doing and God's will because it was not accompanied by a mass *teshuva* movement and King Messiah riding in on his horse is simply ignorant. To further support this ignorant claim by dissevering the second half of Rabbi Yossi bar Chanina's words is disingenuous.

Rabbi Chelbo derives four oaths from the text of Shir HaShirim, and applies them all to Israel. The first is that they should not rebel against the kingdoms, which we can understand plainly as accepting their authority while in exile.

The second is that they should not force the end, which means to raise an army and wage war against the nations to fight their way out of exile. This explanation is proven by the immediately following examples of the four generations which went against this expression of God's will, and were unsuccessful.

It must be emphasized that this has nothing to do with defending ourselves from hostile elements. It is not Hashem's will for the nations to slaughter the Jews, nor for the Jews to meekly submit to slaughter – even if our sins cause divine protection to be removed, God forbid.

Another version of the Midrash changes one letter of this oath, which completely alters the meaning. Instead of reading “*yidchaku*” this version reads “*yirchaku*”, which means the Jews should not distance the redemption by piling sins onto those which already need to be expiated. (This version also clearly indicates that these “oaths” are not oaths that actual human beings formally took, but expressions of God's definite will, as we explained.)

The third oath, that we should not reveal secrets of the Torah to the nations, is interesting, but not relevant to our discussion.

The fourth oath contains the key phrase with which we began: that they should not go up like a wall from the exile. This is also explained as an act of rebellion against the nations and, by extension, the exile that had been decreed upon the nation.

But what if the nations encouraged the Jews to make *aliya*? What if the forced exile was **over** and the only thing holding the Jews back from leaving was their willingness to pack their

bags and go? Clearly the intention of the Midrash is not to prohibit a mass return to Israel until Moshiach forcibly drags the Jews onto a plane.

Indeed, the very next line of the Midrash questions the purpose of Moshiach. He is not a rescuer who parachutes into the teeth of the exile and extracts hostage Jews. Rather, his job is to gather those who have refrained from returning before he arrived. One of the commentaries on the page even speculates that this is a derogatory statement about the exiles who require Moshiach to bring them back.

After all, once the exile is over, what Jew in his right mind would remain there one moment longer? What Jew in his right mind would prefer to continue a state of existence that was decreed as the worst of national punishments?

It is no coincidence indeed that the Malbim writes that the second Beit Hamikdash could have been the ultimate redemption if the exiles returned like a wall. The Malbim understood this Midrash quite well, and thus understood that returning en masse was only contrary to God's will when done by force against the nations of the world while the period of exile was still clearly in effect. When Koresh, the King of Persia, gave his instruction and blessing for the Jews to return to Israel en masse, taking him up on that could hardly be considered an act of rebellion or a violation of God's will. His words signaled the end of the exile period. It then became **incumbent** upon the Jews to make *aliya* en masse.

As if this is not powerful enough, the following Gemara in Yoma (9b) drives the point home in the sharpest of terms:

“Resh Lakish was swimming in the Jordan River. Rabba bar bar Chana extended him a hand. [Resh Lakish refused to take his hand.] He said, 'God hates you, as it is written 'If it is a wall, we will build for it a palace of silver, and if it is a door, we will affix it with boards of cedar' (Shir HaShirim 8:9). Had you made yourselves like a wall and all gone up in the days of Ezra, you would have been compared to silver, which does not rot. Now that you went up like doors [Rashi: like one person opening and another person closing, meaning that the Jews made *aliya* only partially] you were compared to cedar, which is liable to rot.”

Many generations after the destruction of the second Beit Hamikdash, the descendants of the Jews of Israel harbored a burning resentment toward the descendants of those who remained in Persia. Resh Lakish declared that God hates them! Rashi explains: “God hates all the Jews of Bavel, for they did not ascend in the days of Ezra, and they prevented the *shechina* [God's presence] from coming and returning to settle on the second Beit Hamikdash.”

It cannot be stated any more clearly. The second Beit Hamikdash failed to achieve its potential as the ultimate redemption because the Jewish people failed to return en masse when the opportunity was given to them.

On the heels of the Holocaust, once again the nations of the world voted to permit the Jews' return to Israel. This event was no less miraculous than the King of Persia having a similar divine inspiration, and it officially heralded the end of the prolonged exile period. Once the Jewish people are no longer compelled to remain in exile, they are expected and obligated to leave it. Doing so en masse is a vital step toward ushering in the complete redemption. Failing to do so risks squandering the opportunity and incurring God's wrath, as expressed by Resh Lakish.

Indeed, in our time the Jewish people have largely failed just as our ancestors did. And just like our ancestors did, we have experienced continuous difficulties and setbacks in resettling the land. The nations of the world have been repenting their miraculous, divinely-induced vote at the United Nations ever since that day – just as their predecessors did in the days of Ezra. Their support for the Jewish enterprise has become lukewarm at best, and is often mere camouflage.

That at any point in history the majority of world powers could vote for the creation of a Jewish state in our ancestral land is a miracle on par with any other in history – one that merits getting the message and returning en masse. Hashem's continued miraculous protection over Israel in spite of itself is further sign that He wants this return to succeed.

There are not two legitimate sides to this issue. Anyone who believes that a mass return to Israel is anything other than God's definite will is ignorant, and bears responsibility for setting back the redemption process.

If you are reading this outside of Israel, please pack your bags and return home.

If you are reading this in Israel but do not recognize or support the state as an expression of God's will, you are terribly misguided. There are many, many faults and shortcomings of the state in its current form. Nevertheless, God wants the entire nation to return and participate in the building of the state. In so doing we will help usher in the complete redemption we are all waiting for.

Chapter 15 Will the Prophets Live Forever?

The Book of Zecharya contains many cryptic visions, and the commentators acknowledge that their interpretations are highly speculative.

“The prophecy of Zecharya is very closed . . . and we are unable to determine the true interpretation until [future times when this is taught to us],” writes Rashi at the start of his commentary.

Ibn Ezra writes that even if we had access to more historical knowledge of that time period to which we could apply some of the prophecies, “we would be groping like blind people against a wall, saying that maybe this is what the prophecy is referring to – but now we have nothing on which to lean.”

Nevertheless, there are many clear lessons that can be extracted from the prophecies and the best efforts of the commentators. We will continue to focus on the lessons that have the greatest relevance to modern times.

“In the eighth month, in the second year to Darius, the word of Hashem came to Zecharya son of Berechya son of Ido the prophet, as follows. Hashem was wroth with your fathers, for they angered him. Say to them, so says the God of Hosts, return to Me, says the God of Hosts, and I will return to you, says the God of Hosts.” (Verses 1-3)

Perhaps the three-fold mention of “says the God of Hosts” in a single, straightforward sentence is meant to emphasize just how critical this message is, and this opportunity. Alternatively, this could be similar to chapter 1, verse 13 in Chagai, where the text emphasizes that a message that could easily be dismissed as a generic *drasha* from a spiritual leader is in fact the direct word of God.

“Don't be like your fathers, to whom the first prophets called, saying, so says the God of Hosts, return now from your bad ways and your evil deeds. But they did not hear and did not listen to me, says God.

“Where are your fathers? And will the prophets live forever? However, My words and My laws that I commanded my servants, the prophets [to prophesy], did they not befall your fathers? And they returned and said, as the God of Hosts planned to do to us, according to our ways and our deeds, so He did with us.” (Verses 4-6)

This prophecy is stated one month prior to Chagai's final message, at the critical juncture before the Beit Hamikdash was rebuilt, and clear problems with the return to Zion were already evident. The overall message is clear: your ancestors had the same opportunity and the same warning, but they failed to listen and were punished. Don't make the same mistake.

What is meant by “will the prophets live forever”?

Many commentators cite the teaching of our Sages that this is a retort from the people: “Yes, our fathers are no longer alive, but the prophets of their time are no longer alive either. So what?”

Hashem then responds that of course the prophets will not live forever, but their words came to pass, and the fathers of these people acknowledged their truth after the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash.

This dialogue is puzzling, because the death of a prophet does not discredit his words, and it is unclear how the people would expect to challenge Zecharya based on the fact that both their fathers and the prophets who warned them are no longer alive.

Ibn Ezra cites Yefes, who understand this too as a message from Hashem: Know that prophecy will come to an end, but the words of the Torah and its warnings came true, and are just as relevant for you.

Malbim takes a similar approach: "I will not send new prophets to you, because you don't need them now, after you have seen that all the dire warnings of the previous prophets came upon you."

As we noted earlier, there are many who believe that the Jewish people and the nation of Israel must be handcuffed from taking game-changing actions until a prophet comes and instructs them. This is absolutely not true. God expects us to discern the proper course of action from the Torah, the prophecies of old, our history, and current events. We cannot claim to know absolute Truth in absence of a prophet, but if we proceed with our best effort and sincere motivations, we can count on Hashem to guide us. The words of the prophets live forever even if the authors are no longer with us, and those words speak to us today as voices of instruction.

Chapter 16 Redemption As Compensation

Chapter 1 continues with an ambiguous vision of horses of different colors in a swamp. Zecharya does not understand his own vision, which commentators take as an indication that the level of prophecy is far less than it was in earlier times. Zecharya asks an angel to clarify the vision for him. He is then shown that the horses have been sent to scout the nations of the land, and they report that the nations are settled and tranquil.

The angel then challenges Hashem and asks how long He will refrain from having mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah. Hashem replies with comforting words and says that He is extremely jealous for the sake of Jerusalem and Zion.

"And I am wrathful against the tranquil nations with a great wrath, for I was angry [against the Jews] a little bit, but they assisted to do evil. Therefore, so says Hashem: I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy. My house will be built in it, says the God of Hosts, and a measuring line will be set upon Jerusalem [to build the walls]. Furthermore, call out saying, so says the God of Hosts: My city will once again spread out from good, and Hashem will once again console Zion, and will once again choose in Jerusalem." (Verses 15-17)

Most commentators understand this prophecy as positive from start to finish. "My city will once again spread out from good" means that Jerusalem will expand and be filled with peace and goodness.

Metzudat David, true to form, is troubled by this interpretation, because it was not satisfyingly fulfilled during the time of the second Beit Hamikdash. Therefore, he once again opts for an interpretation that doesn't fit perfectly with the text or context to avoid this theological problem.

According to Metzudat David, "My city will once again spread out from good" means something entirely different: the city will once again be destroyed, and the residents will be scattered, and removed from all good. This dire prophecy is followed with a consolation, that Jerusalem will once again be chosen and rebuilt in future times.

Malbim takes a similar approach, though according to him the destruction is only hinted by the fact that a future consolation is mentioned; he interprets "My city will once again spread out from good" in a positive way like the other commentators. He adds that because the nations terrorized the Jews, not only will the Beit Hamikdash be rebuilt, but the walls of Jerusalem will now be rebuilt as well.

This text provides further evidence that the return from exile can be hastened by the nations of the world oppressing the Jews. A certain "reasonable" amount of unkind treatment can be expected to accompany exile, but when the nations treat the Jews with savagery Hashem can't take it, and His mercy is aroused in spite of our own continued sins. This is stated as a primary reason for the return and rebuilding of the second Beit Hamikdash

This is also the best reason for the return in modern times on the heels of the greatest, most widespread savagery against the Jews since the destruction of Jerusalem. Those who attempt to deligitimize Israel today because it was not created by the most righteous of people in the most ideal of circumstances miss this critical point. *None of that matters.* Redemption through national repentance and merit is ideal, but a return to Israel can be ushered in before it is decreed or merited as a response to overwhelming persecution by the nations. This is no less legitimate, and no less an opportunity. Those who reject this return because they can't have it all their way are sorely mistaken, and risk terrible consequences.

It is also clear from this text (among many others) that exile from Israel into the *best* of circumstances is an extremely harsh punishment. This is something the vast majority of Jews fail to appreciate, as they would be more than content to remain in exile indefinitely unless persecution becomes overwhelming. Returning to Israel is not something that should be viewed as a last resort, a safety net if things get too bad (whatever that means) in a foreign nation. It is an ideal to be yearned for and actively pursued in even the most comfortable of situations in a foreign land. We don't really belong there, ultimately we don't have a future there, and we are not meant to ever become too comfortable there, lest we lose sight of the big picture.

It is not far-fetched to speculate that every so often Jews must be persecuted just to remind them of this. Perhaps if we appreciated this critical lesson we would not need it to be driven home in harsh ways.

Chapter 17 Reaching Out to the Exiles

Chapter 2 begins with a vision that represents Hashem casting down the nations that had subjugated the Jews. This is followed by a vision of a man measuring Jerusalem to outline its length and width. The angels run after this man and tell him not to bother, since Jerusalem will be "spread out" due to the multitudes of people and animals within it.

Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Radak once again interpret this vision "locally", preferring a somewhat-fulfilled prophecy that is most relevant to the people over an interpretation that defers it to a distant future. They explain it to mean either that the city will not have a wall, so that it can continuously expand (Rashi) or that it will continue to expand outside the wall, and the people will still feel protected (Ibn Ezra and Radak). They will not need a wall to protect them, because Hashem will be a "wall of fire around them" (Verse 9).

Metzudat David and Malbim are true to their approaches as well. They defer the most glorious aspect of the vision to future times, as nothing in the period of the second Beit Hamikdash fits comfortably enough for them. According to them, this vision is primarily one of consolation, that there will be a better future even though the second Beit Hamikdash will not be the ultimate redemption.

In the following two verses Hashem for the first time delivers a message to the Jews who remained in Bavel.

"Hey! Hey! Hurry out from the north land, says Hashem. For like the four winds of the heavens I spread you, says Hashem. Hey! Escape to Zion, those who dwell in Bavel." (Verses 10-11)

Radak and Malbim limit this call to Judah and Benjamin, who were exiled to Bavel, and derive from "like the four winds of the heavens I spread you" that the time to redeem those who were exiled to more distant lands had not yet come. Most other commentators agree that these verses focus on the Jews in Bavel, but it is not clear that those in more distant lands are excluded. Metzudat David explicitly *includes* those Jews, explaining that they should hurry back precisely because they have a long journey.

In any case, this is the clearest indication to date that Hashem wanted the Jews to make *aliya en masse*.

“For so says the God of Hosts, after honor, I am sent to the nations that plunder you. For one who touches you touches the apple of His eye. For behold I raise My hand upon them, they will be plunder to those who serve them. Then you will know that the God of Hosts sent me.” (Verses 11-13)

These verses continue to encourage the exiles in Bavel. “After honor” is ambiguous, but is generally explained to mean that after the honor that Hashem has previously promised for Jerusalem, He now turns His attention to exact vengeance on those who persecuted the exiles.

Radak says this refers to future times, because “they will be plunder to those who serve them” was not fulfilled. Most of the other commentators strangely ignore this issue.

Ibn Ezra, however, has a remarkable take on these verses and those that follow. He writes that Hashem is telling the Jews in Bavel that they have nothing to fear from enemies on the journey back to Zion, for Hashem will raise His hand to strike anyone who seeks to plunder them.

“Sing and rejoice, daughter of Zion, for behold I will come and dwell among you, says Hashem. And many gentiles will join to God on that day, and they will be to Me for a nation – but I will dwell among you. Then you will now that the God of Hosts sent me to you. And Hashem will inherit Judah as His portion on the holy land, and He will again choose in Jerusalem. All flesh [the nations] will be quiet before Hashem, for He has roused from His holy dwelling.” (Verses 14-17)

Radak wavers here. “It is plausible to explain this prophecy until “His holy dwelling” as referring to the future days of Moshiach, because it says “and many gentiles will join...all flesh will be quiet”, and we don’t see this in the times of the second Beit Hamikdash. However, the rest of the section deals with the second Beit Hamikdash, for it speaks about Yehoshua and Zerubavel.”

Radak is torn between this prophecy not being fulfilled during the second Beit Hamikdash and the fact that deferring it to future times simply doesn’t fit with this entire section. When similar issues previously arose, Radak squeezed the prophecy into contemporary events, but here that simply isn’t possible. This prophecy was not fulfilled. So Radak is forced to speculate that a long section that is indisputably referring to the second Beit Hamikdash has a few verses sandwiched in the middle that predict future times.

Ibn Ezra breaks away from this approach. “[This prophecy was] on the condition that the Jews would join from all the nations, but they did not do so, as I explained in Shir HaShirim . . . ‘and the nations will join’ [was also conditional] if the Jews would come.”

Ibn Ezra is the earliest commentator we have seen to take the “conditional” approach to an unfulfilled prophecy. Most of the other commentators simply explain these verses without committing to a particular time period. Rav Yosef Kara valiantly attempts to keep the prophecy contemporary by writing that it was fulfilled by many gentiles converting to Judaism when Zerubavel built the Beit Hamikdash. But if that is all it was meant to be, it certainly sounds anticlimactic.

The smoothest reading of the chapter is that Hashem is explicitly calling for the Jews who have thus far remained in exile to return to Israel and help usher in the ultimate redemption. As we know, they failed to answer this call, and largely prevented the ultimate redemption.

As we will see, Hashem will soon respond to this in very unsettling terms.

Do we hear His call today?

Chapter 18 **Hashem Cleanses the Sins**

“And He showed me Yehoshua, the Kohen Gadol, standing before an angel of Hashem, and the Satan was standing to his right to prosecute him. And Hashem said to the Satan, Hashem rebukes you, Satan, and Hashem rebukes you [again], He who chooses in Jerusalem. Is this not an ember saved from a fire?

“And Yehoshua was wearing dirty garments, and standing before the angel. And He spoke up and said to those standing before Him, as follows. Remove the dirty garments from upon him! And He said to him, See, I have dissolved your sin from you, and clothed you in nice garments.

“And He said, place a clean hat on his head. And they placed a clean hat on his head, and clothed him in garments, and the angel of Hashem was standing by.” (Chapter 3, Verses 1-5)

Once again we have a wide variance of interpretations, which center on the following key questions:

- 1) What is the sin of Yehoshua?
- 2) Who is the prosecutor?
- 3) Why does Hashem step in and defend Yehoshua?
- 4) What is the significance of this vision?

According to most commentators, who cite a teaching from the Sages, the sin of Yehoshua is that his sons married foreign women. He is held responsible for not protesting their behavior, and this sin is represented by his soiled garments.

Ibn Ezra disagrees, and asserts that the soiled garments do not represent a sin altogether; rather, they represent the lack of honor in Yehoshua's current position, due to the absence of the Beit Hamikdash. According to Ibn Ezra, the word “*avon*” should not be translated as “sin”, but as “shame”, which is an alternate meaning.

The Satan is taken literally by some commentators as a prosecuting angel (Rashi, Rav Yosef Kara). Others say the Satan represents Sanbalat and the other adversaries of the Jews in Jerusalem (Ibn Ezra, Radak, Metzudat David). In essence there is little practical difference between these interpretations, because prosecution by angels and earthly deterrents are two sides of the same coin.

Hashem rebukes the Satan and tells him to refrain from prosecuting Yehoshua any further, because he is an exceedingly righteous man. According to a Midrashic teaching that is cited by several commentators, this is evidenced by the fact that he was miraculously saved from harm when Nevuchadnetzar cast him into an inferno – “an ember saved from a fire”.

Radak and Ibn Ezra explain this more simply: Hashem will not allow Yehoshua to be prosecuted any further because he was rescued from the fires of the exile, returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash, and now stands ready to serve as the Kohen Gadol.

According to those who say the soiled garments represent the intermarriage of his children, the removal of these soiled garments represents an instruction for Yehoshua to separate his sons from their foreign wives so this stain is removed. According to Ibn Ezra, the changing of the garments represents the glory that will soon be restored to Yehoshua's position with the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash.

According to all interpretations, Hashem is cutting off the prosecution to facilitate the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash. He is refusing to allow even legitimate spiritual impediments to stand in the way (though of course He warns Yehoshua and the people to correct their flaws). This is consistent with His special dispensation to later accept sacrifices to atone for the national sin of idol worship, as we discussed earlier.

This is yet another sign of Hashem going above and beyond His normal protocol to give this opportunity every chance of succeeding.

Chapter 19

My Servant, the Blossom

“And the angel of Hashem exhorted Yehoshua as follows. So says the God of Hosts: If you go in My ways, and if you guard My statutes, and if you also supervise My house, and also guard My courtyard, then I will give you passage among those who stand here.

“Listen now, Yehoshua, the Kohen Gadol, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men of wonders. For I will bring My servant, the blossom.” (Verses 6-8)

The Sages say that the “friends” of Yehoshua refer to Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya, on whose behalf a great wonder was performed when they were saved from Nevuchadnetzar's inferno. Most commentators cite this interpretation.

Radak and Ibn Ezra explain simply that his friends are his fellow Kohanim, and that they are worthy of having wonders performed for them.

Rav Yosef Kara says the friends are the exiles who returned from Bavel, which was a wondrous miracle.

What about “My servant, the blossom”?

Rashi explains simply that Zerubavel’s greatness is small now, but it will blossom when the Beit Hamikdash and Jerusalem are rebuilt.

Rav Yosef Kara explains that Zerubavel is a blossom of the Davidic dynasty, and Hashem has brought him to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash.

Ibn Ezra writes that many commentators equate “the blossom” with Moshiach, but his preferred interpretation is that it refers to Zerubavel’s greatness.

Metzudat David defers this prophecy to the future, because he considers the Messianic connotations too strong to refer to Zerubavel directly. Once again he compromises on a smooth textual reading – in this case the end of the verse will come thousands of years after the beginning of it – to avoid the problem of a sort-of fulfilled prophecy. Malbim takes a similar approach.

It is fascinating the way the commentators interpret “My servant, the blossom”. Unlike by previous Messianic phrases attributed to Zerubavel, no one, not even Malbim, equates Zerubavel with a potential Moshiach. He will be great, and Moshiach will eventually come from his “blossom”.

Has the opportunity for him to be Moshiach come and gone? As positive as the prophecy is and is clearly meant to be, one cannot help but feel disappointed.

“For behold, the stone that I placed before Yehoshua – on one stone, seven eyes. Behold, I release its vision (*“mefate’ach pitucha”*), says the God of Hosts, and I will remove the sin of this land on one day. On that day, says the God of Hosts, each man will call his friend to [join him] under his grapevine and under his fig tree.” (Verses 9-10)

This vision concludes with an ambiguous, but very positive message.

Rashi once again sticks to the contemporary time period. The foundation of the Beit Hamikdash that seems small in your eyes (the “one stone”) will increase many times over. Alternatively, the “seven eyes” represent Hashem’s watchfulness over the building to increase it many times over. *“Mefate’ach pitucha”* means that Hashem will undo the plot of the enemies to prevent the rebuilding. Rashi says he does not know what day is referred to by Hashem removing the sin of the land on one day. An addendum to his commentary explains this to mean that on the day they begin to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash the curse against the crops will be removed.

Metzudat David once again explains this vision according to future times, because once again it was not satisfyingly fulfilled. He writes that each stone in the future Beit Hamikdash will have special protection from Hashem. *“Mefate’ach pitucha”* means that Hashem will personally engrave designs on the stones, meaning that He will assist in the building. At one moment He will remove sin from the land by rejuvenating the people with a new spirit, so that they will no longer sin.

Chapter 20 A Final Message to Zerubavel

In chapter 4, Zecharya is shown a vision of a *menora* with seven candles, each of which has seven tubes bringing olive oil to it from a large cup. An olive tree stands on each side of this cup.

Zecharya is once again baffled by the vision, and the angel is surprised by this. The angel explains as follows:

“This is the word of Hashem to Zerubavel, as follows. Not with an army, and not with strength, but with My spirit, says the God of Hosts. Who are you, the great mountain? Before Zerubavel you will be flat land. And he will take the main stone, [and there will be] shouts of joy, “It is beautiful, beautiful!” (Verses 6-7)

The main message in this vision is that just as the *menora* was formed and is operating without human effort, so will Zerubavel (or his descendant, Moshiach, according to Metzudat David) succeed by God's might, not his own.

If this message is contemporary, it is meant to encourage Zerubavel, that despite his present weakness he will succeed because that is God's will. He need not be concerned with his adversaries in Israel or the Persian Empire; both are imposing mountains only in their own eyes, but Hashem will flatten them before Zerubavel. He should rebuild the Beit Hamikdash without fear.

If this refers to Messianic times, as per Metzudat David, the message is that Moshiach will rule over the nations not because he overpowers them, but because Hashem subjugates them before him. The seemingly powerful army of Gog that rises up against Moshiach will be flattened before him.

The deeper message here is in fact relevant to all times, particularly modern Israel. With apologies to the politicians and military strategists who think the safety of Israel is in their cunning and might, they are far less important than they deem themselves to be. We will always be outnumbered and outgunned by our enemies, and that is precisely the way it is *supposed* to be so that it will be unmistakable that Hashem fights our battles for us.

When the Jews lose sight of this and put all their trust in their own capabilities, there is guaranteed to be a bad outcome in one of two ways, which often follow one another.

1) They become dangerously overconfident, and will ultimately be humbled by a military setback (possibly even an actual defeat, God forbid).

2) They realize that they can't possibly maintain a military advantage, and rely on the nations of the world to protect them.

The Jews have historically fallen into these two traps over and over again, and they continue to do so in our time.

"Not with an army, and not with strength, but with My spirit, says the God of Hosts."

This message to Zerubavel is one of enduring relevance to Israel, one that is emphasized over and over again throughout Tanach. The sooner we embrace the truth of this message, the sooner we will merit to enjoy its fulfillment.

Chapter 21 Dropping a Bomb on Bavel

The particulars of the *menora* vision are explained through the rest of chapter 4, but we will proceed to chapter 5, which is more relevant to our theme. In fact, chapter 5 contains a bombshell regarding the exiles in Bavel.

"And I returned and lifted my eyes, and I saw, and behold, there was a flying scroll. And he [the angel] said to me, what do you see? And I said, I see a flying scroll, its length twenty *amot* and its width ten *amot*.

"And he said to me, this is the curse that is going upon the face of the land. For all who steal, from this like it will be cleaned away [*"nikah"*]. And all who swear [falsely], from this like it will be cleaned away.

"I have taken it out, says the God of Hosts, and it will come to the house of the thief and to the house of the one who swears in My name falsely, and it will dwell within his house, and it will destroy it, and its wood, and its stones." (Verses 1-4)

The commentators analyze the particulars of the vision, but we will focus on the essential message.

Writes Radak: "It is not clear regarding which time this prophecy is said. It seems that it refers to the [present] time of the prophet, for we see in the Book of Ezra many sins that were in their hands. And for [the sins of] stealing and false oaths this curse went out..."

"From this like it he will be cleaned away [*"nikah"*]" is an ambiguous phrase. Rashi and Rav Yosef Kara explain as follows: until now Hashem did not punish individuals who engaged in

these sins (“*nikah*” is defined in a positive sense as “treated as innocent” according to this interpretation). However, from this point forward the scroll of curses has gone out to scour the land and punish the sinners.

Metzudat David explains that the names of the sinners are written on one side of the scroll, and the curses on the other side. Just as the punishment is written on the scroll, so will the sinners be swept away.

Radak explains that one side contained a curse for thieves, and the other side a curse for those who swear falsely.

Ibn Ezra's preferred interpretation is that the curses for both sins were written on each side of the scroll. He says that “going upon the face of the land” indicates that these curses include the Jews in Bavel and Persia who commit these sins. “*Nikah*” means that these sinners believed that Hashem would exonerate them.

Malbim adds that those who swear falsely to exonerate themselves in the courts unwittingly accept curses upon themselves.

This vision is the first indication of widespread corruption among the people. The crimes of stealing and swearing falsely are particularly destructive, for stealing wrecks the foundation of society, and swearing falsely abuses the holiest of holies – God's very name – for heinous purposes.

The vision continues:

“And the angel speaking within me went out and said to me, lift up your eyes and see what is this that goes out. And I said, what is it? And he said, this is the measure that goes out. And he said, this is their eye in all the land.

“And behold, a square measure of lead lifted itself, and this one woman was sitting inside the measure. And he said, this is the wickedness, and he cast her into the measure, and he cast the lead stone onto its opening.” (Verses 5-8)

Most of the commentators explain that this vision represents the Jews cheating in business with false weights and measures. Many also understand the measurement going out to symbolize that Hashem will punish these evildoers measure for measure.

“This is their eye in all the land” is interpreted in a variety of ways. Rashi and Rav Kara say it is the eyes of sinners looking all over for opportunities to cheat others. Ibn Ezra says Hashem will reveal their hidden crimes so that they will be visible to all. Radak explains that God's watchful eye is upon them, seeing all that they do.

Ibn Ezra understands the lead stone to indicate that the sins were heavy.

The evildoing is represented by a woman because the nation is often referred to in feminine terms (Rav Kara and Metzudat David). She is cast down from her sitting position to represent the suffering and punishments that will come upon the Jews for their corruption (Rashi and Rav Kara). The stone is cast upon the measure to seal their fate in one form or another.

Radak presents an alternative explanation, that this vision represents the previous exile of the ten tribes to more distant lands due to their longstanding idol worship and general wickedness. They are shown as a rebellious woman. The lead stone is cast upon their measure-for-measure punishment to indicate that their exile will be prolonged in kind.

Metzudat David interprets the angel going out from within Zecharya as a hint that prophecy will be removed from the nation. If so, the symbolism here would indicate that the corruption of the people is responsible for this.

Now comes the bombshell.

“And I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, two women were going out. The wind was in their wings, and they had wings like the *chasida* bird. They carried the measure between the earth and the heavens. And I said to the angel speaking within me, where are they taking the measure?

“And he said to me, to build for her a house in the land of Shinar [Bavel], and it is established and left there on its foundation.” (Verses 9-11)

Rashi and Rav Kara interpret this entire vision as a referring to the previous generations that sinned and were exiled to Bavel as a result – but Rashi adds that he is not comfortable with

it. This is not surprising, for what would be the purpose of this elaborate vision, especially at this point in the book?

Not surprisingly, the other commentators interpret it as a symbol of the impending future. And their interpretations of the sin and punishment are almost uniform.

Radak writes: “. . . [H]e showed him a vision about those who remained in Bavel, who were indifferent toward going up to Jerusalem, even after they started to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash . . . they caused Hashem to punish them according to their ways. It is as if they exiled themselves.

“‘And it is established and placed there on its foundation’ means to say that they built houses there and established their permanent residence there . . . this foundation that they made [for themselves] from building houses and planting vineyards made them disinterested in going up from Bavel, for they remained there after Ezra went up, and they did not want to go up even after they started to build the Beit Hamikdash.

“‘And placed there [“*v’hu’nicha*”]’ is a combination [of two words] active and passive, for originally when they were exiled there, they were placed there [*huncha*] against their will, but afterwards they stayed there [*he’nicha*] – she herself, meaning to say that they stayed there by their choice, and were indifferent toward going up to Jerusalem.”

After a mere 70 years, most of the Jewish people had forgotten that exile from their homeland was just about the worst of all punishments, and preferred to remain in an exile that was now self-imposed. It didn't matter that Israel was once again in their hands. It didn't matter that it was clearly Hashem's will for them to return. It didn't even matter that the Beit Hamikdash was being rebuilt. They had built homes and planted vineyards in Bavel, after all. How could they give that up to be part of Jewish destiny?

Ibn Ezra writes: “The meaning is . . . that the king of Bavel would commit violence against the families of Israel that stayed in Bavel, who remained and did not heed the command of Hashem through His prophet to come to the second Beit Hamikdash. Behold, they [the Babylonian officers] would not allow the woman – which represents the families of Israel – who was sitting in the measure to flee from there.

“They were . . . taking the measure . . . for Hashem decreed to recompense them. They built for the woman inside the measure a house in Bavel, for there He would detain her against her will, because of the sin that she did not want to come to build the Beit Hamikdash.”

The punishment for these exiles-by-choice is measure for measure; they would sleep in the bed that they made for themselves. But when the exile was no longer comfortable, when persecution taught them that they did not belong there, they would no longer be allowed to leave.

Metzudat David writes: “She prepared a foundation for herself to live and did not go up to the Land of Israel, and so she would remain there on the place of her foundation, and she would not continue [to have the opportunity] to go up, since the second Beit Hamikdash will also be destroyed . . . She did not want to go up; therefore she will remain there.”

Not only would the exiles-by-choice suffer from their shortsighted priorities, but they played a major role in the ultimate failure of the second Beit Hamikdash. What could have been the ultimate redemption would be only a temporary interruption to the exile. Exile was what they wanted, so exile is what they got. And they spoiled the opportunity for their brethren in Israel as well.

How many millions of Jews have made the same regrettable mistake in our time? Why do Jews continue to remain in Europe, living atop the ashes of their ancestors? Why do Jews continue to fret over “the future of Jewry” in lands where there is no Jewish future, and where we were never supposed to feel too comfortable even in the best of times? Why do they view *aliya* as a last resort, a move to be made only if persecution in exile becomes “too much”?

Hashem has freed them from bondage, yet they choose continued subjugation over national self-determination. So long as the *goyim* don't murder them (or murder “too many” of them) they prefer their homes and vineyards in exile to building Jewish destiny in the Land of Israel.

In so doing, they once again handicap the redemption process and imperil their own future. When their homes and vineyards are no longer foremost considerations, it might be too late. We should not need to be taught this yet again.

May God open their eyes and inspire them. May He give them strength to build a new, truly permanent foundation in the only place that is their home.

Chapter 22 A Donation from the Exiles

Chapter 6 begins with a vision of chariots with horses of different colors taking them to different lands. The commentators generally interpret this to symbolize the different empires that would rule over the world in the coming future. Perhaps this vision comes in the aftermath of the previous vision to indicate that a prolonged exile is now virtually certain.

In the second half of the chapter, representatives of the exiles bring silver and gold from Bavel as a donation to the Beit Hamikdash. Hashem then instructs Zecharya:

“Take silver and gold and make it into crowns, and put it on the head of Yehoshua son of Yehotzadak, the Kohen Gadol. And say to him as follows: so says the God of Hosts, here is a man, *Tzemach* is his name, and from his place will blossom, and he will build the sanctuary of Hashem. And he will build the sanctuary of Hashem, and he will carry glory, and he will sit and rule on his throne. And the Kohen will be on his throne, and a counsel of peace will be between the two of them.” (Verses 11-13)

There are two primary ambiguities in this prophecy, which leads to a wide variety of interpretations.

1) There is no direct mention of Zerubavel, even though he is the only logical counterpart to Yehoshua for the second crown.

2) Once again we have Messianic implications, which naturally raises the question of when the latter part of this prophecy was meant to occur.

Rashi sticks to the present, remaining consistent with his approach throughout. *Tzemach* is synonymous with Zerubavel, and he is called this because his greatness will grow little by little. Interestingly, Rashi notes that others interpret this as a futuristic prophecy, but Rashi openly rejects this approach, arguing that the surrounding context clearly speaks of the second Beit Hamikdash.

Rav Yosef Kara takes a similar approach, but offers a unique interpretation of “*atarot*” in the text to refer to fancy windows in the Beit Hamikdash, as opposed to crowns. Rav Kara probably feels compelled to do this because actual crowns don't seem appropriate for this quasi-redemption that never really took off.

Ibn Ezra writes that *both* crowns were placed on Yehoshua's head, apparently because only he reached the highest possible position available to him. He also speculates that this entire prophecy occurred only as a vision, though that seems unlikely.

Radak takes the opposite approach, writing that the second crown was indeed placed on Zerubavel's head. His greatness will grow little by little, and the text repeats that he will build the sanctuary of Hashem to emphasize the point. The text doesn't mention Zerubavel wearing the crown because it is self-understood; Zerubavel is in the place of a king, and a king must have a crown. He even speculates that after this point the people referred to Zerubavel as a king, and no longer merely as a governor. Even though this is not written anywhere, Radak says it is logical.

This approach fits well with the text, but is otherwise very difficult to accept. The assertion that placing a crown on Zerubavel's head does not need to be mentioned is very dubious, considering both the great significance this would entail and the fact that the Persian king would have taken that as a sign of open rebellion.

Surely Radak is aware of these weaknesses with his approach, but apparently he deems it inescapable that the entire prophecy is referring to the present, not future times.

Metzudat David has no such reservations. In a lengthy commentary, he asserts that the second crown is indeed meant for Zerubavel, but it is not placed on his head precisely because Moshiach will come only from his descendants. The two expressions of growth through him indicate this, similar to what we saw at the end of the Book of Chagai. The repetition of “he will build the sanctuary of Hashem” indicates that Zerubavel will build the second Beit Hamikdash, and his descendant will build the third. The entire prophecy is indeed relevant to the present, but it contains messages regarding the future – messages that once again are bittersweet, as they foretell the ultimate need for a third Beit Hamikdash.

Malbim echoes this approach, sans the bittersweet message, based on the following two verses that conclude the chapter:

“And the crowns shall be to Chelem, and to Tuvia, and to Yedaya, and to Chen son of Tzefanya as a memorial in the sanctuary of Hashem. And distant ones will come and build the sanctuary of Hashem, and you will know that the God of Hosts sent me to you. And it will be if you listen to the voice of Hashem your God.” (Verses 14-15)

Malbim writes that the crowns will remain in the possession of the exiles who donated them, as Zerubavel cannot possibly wear a crown and become Moshiach while subservient to Bavel. The crowns will, however, be stored in the Beit Hamikdash by the windows so that the Jews would see them, remember their purpose, and be inspired to repent to usher in the ultimate redemption.

The “distant ones” refers to the Jews who remained distant in Bavel, instead of returning during the period of the second Beit Hamikdash. “If they wake up and all go up like a wall”, writes Malbim, “then the prophecies would be fulfilled in their time.”

Once again, Malbim maintains that this could have been and should have been the ultimate redemption, but it depended on the active participation of all the exiles. As we know, they favored their homes and vineyards in Bavel.

Metzudat David too alters his approach at the end based on “And it will be if you listen to the voice of Hashem your God.” He writes that the purpose of the redemption from Bavel was so that the Jews would be in a holy place that was particularly conducive to serving Hashem and praying for the ultimate redemption. Had they taken full advantage of this opportunity, it would have truly been the ultimate redemption.

Before we continue with the narrative, an observation. It is striking that the Jews who remained in Bavel clearly recognized that the Beit Hamikdash was real and worthy of their support – yet this support came in the form of monetary donations while they remained behind. If all the eerie parallels between then and now are not enough, one marvels at the way Jews worldwide write generous checks to support Israel, yet feel no strong imperative to physically join the nation here. Their financial contributions are gratefully accepted and incorporated into the redemption process, just as they were by Zecharya, but clearly the greatest contribution they can make would be to live here, build here, and demonstrate through their actions that there is no place they would rather be.

It is the difference between mailing a check to a newly married couple and dancing with them at their wedding. If the couple receives a big pile of checks, but hardly anyone shows up at the wedding, the celebration will be greatly compromised. The significance of going “all in” and joining the redemption process far outweighs sending a donation. And if we return “like a wall”, we can be confident that God will cover our expenses one way or another.

Chapter 23

The Dilemma of the Exiles

Chapter 7 provides yet another mirror for our generation to look into.

In the fourth year to Darius, the Jews of Bavel send emissaries to the Beit Hamikdash with a remarkable question for the Kohanim and the prophets:

Should we continue to mourn on the ninth day of Av?

After all, construction of the Beit Hamikdash was by now in full swing. On the other hand, the Jews were still subservient to Persia. Naturally, the Jews had mixed feelings about the quasi-redemption, and wondered if from a standpoint of Jewish law they were obligated to continue to mourn.

In present times this is a subject of widespread controversy as well, not with regard to mourning, but with regard to celebrating on Yom Ha'atzma'ut. What should be foremost in our religious practice, the partial redemption that has been afforded us, or the continued subservience to the nations? How restrained or unrestrained should our religious celebrating be, if we are to celebrate at all? The particulars of the question are different, but the essence of the question is the same.

Here is how Hashem responds to them:

“And the word of the God of Hosts came to me as follows. Say to the nation of the land, and to the Kohanim, as follows. When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month [the ninth day of Av] and in the seventh month [the Fast of Gedaliah] these seventy years, did you fast for My sake? And were you to eat and drink, would it not be you eating and drinking? Is it not the words that Hashem called through His first prophets, when Jerusalem was settled and tranquil, with its surrounding cities, and the south and the valleys were settled?” (Verses 4-7)

The Jews of Bavel asked what seemed to them a technical question of Jewish law, and expected a simple yes or no answer. Instead, Hashem threw the question back in their faces. In fact, according to Metzudat David (unlike Ibn Ezra), Hashem didn't even respond directly to the emissaries, “for they were as if censured before Him for not returning to dwell in the Land of Israel, and the response went to the residents of Jerusalem so that they should not also be unsure about this.”

Indeed, it does take quite a bit of *chutzpa* to inquire whether it is time to stop mourning the destruction when one has chosen not to participate in the rebuilding.

Hashem proceeds to scoff at their preoccupation with whether or not they should fast or eat on these days. After all, what difference does it make to Him? If they go hungry, does He go hungry (most commentators)? Do they bring honor to Him by fasting that He should be concerned one way or the other (Radak)?

Furthermore, Hashem never commanded them to fast on these days in the first place (Ibn Ezra and Metzudat David). These fasts were only caused by their sins against the words He did command them (Rashi, Rav Kara, and Radak).

In other words, the Jews are preoccupied with technical aspects of Jewish law, but are totally missing the point.

Hashem therefore reiterates the point:

“And so was the word of Hashem to Zecharya as follows. So says the God of Hosts as follows. Judge a truthful law, and act with kindness and compassion, man to his brother. And do not oppress a widow, an orphan, a convert, or a poor person. And evil against one's brother do not think in your hearts.

“But they refused to listen, and they turned a rebellious shoulder, and they made their ears hard of hearing. And they made their hearts tough from accepting the Torah and the words that the God of Hosts sent with His spirit through the first prophets. And there was great wrath from the God of Hosts.

“And it was just as He called and they did not listen, so they called and I did not listen, says the God of Hosts. And I scattered them among all the nations that they did not know, and the land was desolate after them from travelers. And they made the precious land to a wasteland.” (Verses 8-14)

Hashem reiterates that all He wanted from the Jews was for them to behave with justice, compassion, and brotherhood – in absence of this He cannot tolerate them, regardless of how punctiliously they observe “religious” formalities.

Thus concludes chapter 7. Chapter 8 follows this harsh rebuke with six prophecies of consolation. In spite of all the failings of the people to this point, and in spite of the remarkable obtuseness of the Jews of Bavel, Hashem emphasizes His enduring commitment to them. The

future is incredibly bright, and this future can still be realized now – if only they will internalize the message.

We are treated to uplifting predictions of Hashem returning His presence to Jerusalem like a furious lover enraged by the persecution of the nations. Old men and women will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, while the city is filled with children playing in the streets.

“So says the God of Hosts: if this is astonishing in the eyes of the remnant of this nation in those days, it is also astonishing in My eyes, says the God of Hosts.” (Verse 6)

Of course nothing surprises Hashem – certainly not something He Himself does. So if Hashem speaks in such terms even allegorically, it must be astonishing indeed.

Hashem urges the Jews in Israel not to be afraid, to strengthen their hands. The curses of former times are no more. He is sending blessings of peace and prosperity – but He demands some things in return: deal truthfully with one another; be ethical and fair in judgment; refrain from thinking evil of one another; refrain from swearing falsely.

Then Hashem brings up the matter of fasting. The fast days will become joyous holidays, provided the people pursue truth and peace.

The commentators explain that the previous prophecies were all a long tangent leading up to this response to the emissaries from Bavel. One can derive from Hashem's words that the fast days are to remain in effect until the ultimate redemption, when they will become holidays, but He doesn't come out and say it explicitly. Hashem is hammering home the point that religious demonstrations are secondary concerns, and they exist primarily to inspire proper conduct. Without proper conduct, religious demonstrations are nothing more than a hollow mockery.

Unfortunately we have generally remained indifferent to this fundamental lesson. Nowhere does Hashem urge the Jews to agonize over ritualistic nuances or symbolic gestures. Whenever Hashem expresses what is most important to Him, it is that we pursue truth, justice, peace, and kindness. These form the foundation of a Jewish society that can succeed and in which the rituals will have true meaning.

Hashem doesn't really care very much how we celebrate Yom Ha'atzma'ut, or whether we even celebrate it at all. If our worst crime is not sufficiently appreciating what we do have because we still yearn for so much more, so be it. Of far greater interest to Hashem is the type of society we have created, of the type of relations we have with one another.

If we manage our own business properly, we can be sure that Hashem will bring the ultimate redemption quickly, and there will no longer be any doubt about whether and how to celebrate.

Chapter 24

The Siege of Jerusalem

Chapter 8 concludes with more glorious Messianic prophecies. Chapters 9 through the end of the Book of Zecharya continue this Messianic theme with prophecies regarding the downfall of various nations, the coming of Moshiach, and the redemption. Much of this is cryptic and will only be fully understood when the prophecies are fulfilled. The reader is encouraged to study these chapters with the commentators, but we will not discuss them at length lest we get sidetracked from the theme of this book. We will, however, focus on a message derived from chapter 12 that is particularly relevant in our time.

This chapter foretells the first of multiple attempts by the nations of the world to conquer Jerusalem from the Jews. First off, this is a clear indication that the resettlement of Israel before the coming of Moshiach is God's will. There will be great trouble, no question, but the theme of all prophecies such as these is positive, not critical for repossessing their land. Those among us who claim through misguidance, pride, or a political agenda that Israel was born in sin and is an illegitimate child need to acknowledge their error and rejoin the nation. (We would also suggest that anytime Jews would vote alongside the worst of our enemies, they should rethink their position.)

For most of the last two thousand years, the prospect of Jews returning to Israel without being shepherded there by Moshiach was probably incomprehensible. It is no longer a far-fetched scenario, for it has been fulfilled – and the scenario of the nations attempting to forcibly seize Jerusalem from the Jews for some trumped-up reason is also anything but far-fetched in our time. It will be surprising if this *doesn't* happen in the very near future.

“Behold I will make Jerusalem a cup of poison for all the surrounding nations, and also upon Judah, [who] will be in the siege against Jerusalem. And it will be on that day I will make Jerusalem a stone of burden for all the nations. All who carry it will cut themselves, and all the nations will gather against it. On that day, says Hashem, I will strike every horse with terror and its rider with madness. And on the house of Judah I will open My eye, but every horse of the nations I will strike with blindness.

“And the officers of Judah will say in their hearts, strengthen us, residents of Jerusalem, with the God of Hosts, their God. On that day, I will make the officers of Judah like an inferno against wood, and like a torch against the sheaves, and they will consume on the right and on the left all the surrounding nations. And Jerusalem will again dwell in its place, in Jerusalem.” (Verses 2-6)

A particularly fascinating element of this impending battle for Jerusalem is that Jews outside Jerusalem are going to be dragged into it by the nations. Because these Jews are designated as “Judah”, most commentators take it to refer to Jews in cities outside Jerusalem, who will be taken hostage as the nations beat a path to Jerusalem. The nations will compel them to participate in the siege against Jerusalem. But when these Jews see the madness that Hashem inflicts upon the nations, they will draw strength from the prayers of the residents of Jerusalem, then rise up against their captors and destroy them.

It is hard to imagine any God-fearing Jew to participate in a siege against Jerusalem. Are these Jews simply paying lip-service to their captors, hoping for an opportune time to escape? Perhaps.

It seems, however, that these Jews are not comfortably “in the fold”. They are not so corrupted to attack Jerusalem willingly, but if dragged along by powerful nations they can live with the idea. Notice that they do not pray to God on their own, or even refer to Hashem as their own God, but they draw strength from the prayers of the Jews in Jerusalem and *their* God. It therefore seems most likely that these Jews are disaffected or alienated from the Torah, but when Hashem shows Himself they muster the strength to at least identify with their own – and fight for them. It will require a moment of powerful inspiration to restore harmony among much of our people, but we shouldn't think this can't happen or won't happen.

Ibn Ezra asserts that these Jews will be exiles who are forced by their host nations to join the siege of Jerusalem. This seems a likely possibility in our time; we can easily see Jews being accused by their host nations of being traitors, and forced to attack Jerusalem to prove their loyalty. Woe to those who will be forced to experience this.

The next verse is even more fascinating.

“And Hashem will rescue the tents of Judah first, in order that the glory of the house of David and the glory of the residents of Jerusalem should not be great over Judah.” (Verse 7)

If the captives were not independently saved before the residents of Jerusalem (most commentators, including an ancient book cited by Ibn Ezra) or before the residents of Jerusalem came to join the battle (Metzudat David), the Jews of Jerusalem would glorify themselves over the Jews of Judah. They would claim that the victory was in their merit alone. Hashem is so concerned about this that He tells us thousands of years in advance that He will grant the captives an independent victory to spare their honor.

The lesson of humility and sensitivity speaks for itself. But there is a deeper lesson here that is a striking message for our time – which may well be when this prophecy is fulfilled.

There is a large contingent of Jews who believe that all the good that happens to the Jews is in their merit and all the bad that happens is due to the sins of others. Unlike the righteous of previous generations, who were modest in their ways, unassuming, and strove to see the good in their fellow Jew, this contingent flaunts their religious observance, uses rhetoric and propaganda

to portray itself as *the* “Torah community”, and demands homage and all manner of special treatment in exchange for holding up the nation with their presumed merits.

It is not at all far-fetched to see this contingent taking all the credit for Hashem rescuing Jerusalem, for claiming that it is in the merit of their prayers and their overall specialness that everyone else was spared.

Hashem will go out of His way to bring salvation in such a way that this contingent cannot lord it over their brethren. He will make it unmistakable that the Jews they wish to scorn were saved because Hashem loves them, and the public demonstrations of religiosity of this contingent were entirely irrelevant to the miracle.

Perhaps the greatest miracle in this prophecy is not that the nations of the world will fail to conquer Jerusalem. That is an old trick that Hashem has performed many times (though we look forward to witnessing it again in our time). The greatest miracle is that Hashem inspires and brings back the unaffiliated and distant Jews, while simultaneously humbling those who believe the entire nation exists because of them.

We look forward to the day when a proper balance is restored to all our people, and we can continue our journey in brotherhood.

Chapter 25 Love and Rebuke for the Sinful Zionists

Note: This book is intended to be a supplement to one's study of the original texts, not a substitute. There is much more there for the reader to learn and contemplate; we have focused on material that is especially relevant to modern-day Israel.

The Book of Malachi is replete with moral and religious messages that are fundamental to one's Jewish education. However, they are not more relevant to modern times than to any other time. Therefore, instead of getting sidetracked from our theme with a lengthy textual analysis, we encourage the reader to study Malachi on his own. We will extract only a few short messages that fit well with our narrative.

The Book of Malachi accentuates the complicated relationship between the *olim* and Hashem. As we have seen, the people who returned to build the second Beit Hamikdash had a checkered past, and upon their return they did not morph into saintly figures.

Radak sums it up in his introduction: “. . . The Sages write that Malachi is Ezra, but we don't find any place where he is called a prophet, only Ezra the scribe. . . [Malachi was sent] to the Jews to reprove them over their deeds, for the majority of the generation that came up from Bavel held fast to actions that were not good. They married gentile women, as Ezra and Malachi rebuked them . . . and also they were not careful about desecrating the Sabbaths, and other things, as written in the Book of Ezra.”

Perhaps the Sages equate Malachi with Ezra not because they were the same person, but because they shared a similar mission. This is a common allegorical device of the Sages to inform us about a certain individual's character or illustrate some point about history repeating itself.

In any case, it emerges from the books of Ezra, Zecharya, and Malachi that the Jews who returned to Israel were rife with serious crimes against Hashem and one another. Hashem takes them to task in the book of Malachi, lashing out at them with harsh language for their various sins.

Yet one point must not be overlooked.

Hashem loved these people and gave them an *incredible* amount of rope because they returned to Israel to resettle the land.

This is not to suggest that He turned a blind eye to their behavior. The Book of Chagai begins with a description of their supernatural failures because they were lax about rebuilding the Beit Hamikdash. The Book of Zecharya promises destruction to the homes of those who dealt

corruptly and took false oaths. The Book of Malachi rakes them over the coals for numerous other sins, as we will see, some of which may seem incomprehensible to us.

But knowing this makes it all the more remarkable – and drives home a vital lesson – that by returning to settle the land they scored *tremendous* brownie points with Hashem.

In our time it is little different. The people who initially resettled Israel were far from saintly (and those who followed them in leadership positions have generally been no better). These figures are lionized by many in Israeli society for various contributions – real, exaggerated, or imagined. But one thing we never hear said of them is “*Zecher tzadik livracha*”, the memory of a righteous person is for a blessing.

Jews who abide by the Torah and fear God yearn for true leadership and a better society. But make no mistake about it: if the only good thing the founders of Israel ever did was resettle the land, they scored tremendous brownie points with Hashem. This does not erase whatever heinous sins they might have committed as well, but it entitles them to a measure of respect and appreciation. Returning to Israel and helping build it is that big a deal.

It is rarely, if ever, a good idea to judge others, but if we are going to do so, let us emulate Hashem's criteria to the best of our ability. Hashem repeatedly expressed His love and support for people who fell short in many ways. We, who also fall short in many ways, should find it within ourselves to love and support those who may fall even shorter – without condoning their behavior.

Chapter 26 Filthy Bread

All three chapters of Malachi contain harsh criticism of the Jews for various sins. Chapter 1 is directed at the Kohanim, who are blasted for denigrating their service in the Beit Hamikdash.

“A son honors his father, and a slaver his master. If I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My reverence? So says the God of Hosts to you, the Kohanim, shamers of My name. And you say, how have we shamed Your name? You bring upon My altar filthy bread, and you say, how have we sullied You? It is by your saying that the table of Hashem is shameful.

“And when you bring a blind animal to slaughter, is that not bad? Bring that now to your governor. Will he be pleased with you or fulfill your desire? So says the God of Hosts. And now beseech the face of God. Will He favor you? From your hands came this [curse]. Will He grant your request? So says the God of Hosts.

“If only someone among you would close the doors, and not place fire on My altar for nothing. I have no desire for you, says the God of Hosts, and I will not accept a sacrifice from your hands.” (Verses 6-10)

The Kohanim are rebuked for accepting animals of poor quality for sacrifices, thereby disgracing Hashem, instead of educating the people. Worse still, they failed to set a proper example in their own right, as they openly insulted the altar and the sacrificial service.

It may seem incomprehensible that the Kohanim would behave this way. It is certainly easy for us to judge them, but we would be better served by turning the radar on ourselves. Do we treat our own service of Hashem with the proper dignity and reverence?

In many of our synagogues the atmosphere is not one of dignity and reverence. It is commonplace for prayer services to be disturbed by cell phones, talking, frivolity, screaming children, and even loud arguments over how some aspect of the service should be conducted. The majority of men show up late for morning prayers and rush out before the service is concluded. Those who are asked to lead the service will often respond with a remark or a wisecrack demonstrating that the task is a burden to them (which should not be confused with politely refusing due to genuine humility).

“If I am a father, where is My honor?”

Yes, the synagogue can and should provide a social opportunity – after the service, outside the sanctuary.

If we treat our holy places without the proper respect, why should we expect Hashem to invite us back to the Beit Hamikdash?

We pray constantly for Hashem to once again give us the opportunity to offer Him sacrifices. Yet how many of us truly want this opportunity? How many of us are too “enlightened” to bring an animal to be slaughtered and offered as a sacrifice? How many of us desperately want to believe that this will not be part of the service in future times, to spare us this “barbaric, primitive ritual”?

“And if I am a master, where is My reverence? So says the God of Hosts.”

It seems many of us have forgotten that God chooses how He is to be served, and God decides what is right and moral. The more Man has tried to improve on God's laws, the more corrupted and hypocritical he has become. Yet Man continues to tell God how He should run the universe, even while Man fails to properly run so much as his own life.

“And now beseech the face of God. Will He favor you?”

We become angry when God does not grant our requests, forgetting that this is a two-way street, and that He has expectations of us as well. We are willing to accept abuse from human beings in positions of authority, because that is the way of the world. Yet we insist on challenging whatever God demands of us – even though it is always for our own good – because somehow HE doesn't have the right to tell us what to do.

Then when things don't go smoothly for us we question where God was, or whether there is a God, or whether God is truly good and just. We hotly cling to our “right” to ask these questions, yet by no means may God question whether we are truly good and just.

Do we really have the right to shake our heads with dismay at the way the Kohanim behaved in the Beit Hamikdash? Do we truly want what they had and frittered away? Have we internalized the message?

If not, we need to change on the inside and on the outside. Changing on the inside is difficult; it requires proper education, humility, introspection, and a serious desire to improve. But changing on the outside – behaving with respect in the synagogue – is not at all difficult. And once we become used to behaving with respect, we will find that internalizing the message becomes a great deal easier.

The harsh rebuke of the Kohanim is meant to instruct us as well. If we treat our service of Hashem with the respect it deserves, we will make a stronger case for Hashem to grant us greater opportunities with the restoration of the Beit Hamikdash.

Chapter 27 Wearing God Out

Chapter 2 begins with more condemnations of the Kohanim. These conclude with a declaration that they have betrayed their position as spiritual leaders and teachers of Torah. In response to this Hashem will cause them to be lowly and scorned in the eyes of the people.

Malachi then turns his radar on the general population and lambastes them for marrying gentile women. This behavior is called treasonous, abominable, and a desecration of God. Not only have the men intermarried, they have taken foreign wives in *addition* to their Jewish wives, who had been loyal to them. The men now treat their Jewish wives with contempt. Hashem repeatedly refers to this as treason and demands them to be faithful to their Jewish wives, or at the very least free them to marry someone who will love them.

The chapter concludes with one verse that leads into chapter 3:

“You have worn Hashem out with your words. And you say, how have we worn You out? It is when you say that all who do evil are good in the eyes of Hashem, and it is them that He desires. Or [you say] where is the God of justice?” (Verse 17)

This verse is similar to verse 14 in chapter 3, in which the Jews are criticized for saying that it is “worthless to serve God”.

These allegations of the people and Malachi's response to them comprise the final prophecy given to us in the Books of the Prophets. The Book of Malachi, unlike Chagai and Zecharya, contains no implications that the second Beit Hamikdash could become the ultimate redemption. It is clear by now that this special opportunity had been lost, and the return to Israel would revert to its original purpose: to recharge the spiritual batteries of the Jewish people and prepare them for many centuries in exile.

It is fitting, therefore, that the final message we have from the last prophet before the times of Moshiach addresses words that would be spoken countless times from then to this very day. God is accused of favoring the wicked, or stiffing the righteous, or being absent from the equation altogether. So why bother keeping His laws?

To put it colloquially, God is sick and tired of hearing this nonsense. And that was over 2000 years ago.

Malachi responds that the wicked will ultimately be destroyed. He then counters that the Jews have not held up their end of the bargain.

"Return to Me and I will return to you, says the God of Hosts." (Verse 7)

The Jews have withheld their tithes, stealing that which Hashem demanded of them. This brings curses upon them, which they then blame on God. Malachi instructs them to give their tithes faithfully, and guarantees that they will be blessed.

The main message in this chapter is that ultimately we are the cause of our own problems. Although we cannot understand in the short term why the wicked prosper and the righteous often suffer, Hashem records everything, including who remains faithful to Him in dark times. When the score is ultimately settled – and it will be – "you will see what is the difference between a righteous person and a wicked person, between one who serves Hashem and one who does not." (Verse 18)

There are those who will never be convinced. Until the score is indeed settled the questions will always be more compelling to them than the answer. We cannot judge those who have suffered in extreme ways and lost their optimism. What we can do is bolster our own faith when times are relatively good to prepare us for life's challenges, which are inevitable in one form or another. We can take solace in the fact that these questions are nothing new; those who use every tragedy as an opportunity to challenge God are not great innovators. All they are doing is wearing God out and missing the opportunity to demonstrate their faith. For as much as they are scrutinizing God's ways, He is watching them to see how they react.

It is not necessary to have an explanation for every tragedy. We must try our best to accept it as God's will, hold our tongue, and await the better times that are promised at the end of Malachi. If we successfully endure the hard times, we will merit to enjoy the redemption.

May it be soon.

Chapter 28 **Land for Peace**

In the coming chapters we will turn our attention to several burning issues facing modern Israel. Some would argue that these issues are extremely complex, and that there is no clear right answer. Fortunately, we do not have to come up with a right answer on our own; we will once again let the teachings of our prophets guide us. After all, that is what they are there for. We can then proceed confidently in the face of the grimmest challenges.

The cynic would contend that even the teachings of our prophets are subject to so many interpretations that they cannot factor into the discussion. We believe this argument is nonsense; the Torah is meant to be studied, understood, and practically applied. Torah study is not meant to be an endless intellectual exercise to keep men off the streets, but an instruction manual for how to deal with all of life's challenges. The answer will not always be clear to us, but we must do the best we can to derive guidance from the Torah.

Sometimes, however, the answer will be so clear that it will practically hit us over the head. If only we simply listen.

It has become ingrained in the psyche of today's Jews that giving away land belonging to Israel in exchange for peace – or even some faint, wistful hope of some semblance thereof – is the proper course of action. Only a nation as clever as the Jews can devise some of the creative arguments in favor of this idea. After all, how does one demonstrate brilliance by doing the obvious?

What has escaped so many of our “enlightened” brothers and sisters is one simple, though terribly inconvenient fact.

Land for peace is a declaration of war.

After all, the inverse of the proposal is “No land, no peace”. It is not an offer, but an ultimatum. Surrender your land to us, your enemies, or we will attack you.

Hence, land for peace is not a negotiation for peace, but a negotiation for surrender. The Jewish people are probably the only nation in the history of the world that won a war and then negotiated its own surrender. We are certainly the only nation that has done so repeatedly, both in ancient times and modern times. This is likely because any other nation that may have tried such foolhardy behavior quickly became extinct. The fact that we have continued to survive in spite of our repeated groveling after defeated enemies should be proof enough of God's existence for even the most hardened skeptic.

Our ancestors faced a proposal of land for peace thousands of years ago, and they bequeathed to us the appropriate response. This is outlined in the Book of Shoftim (Judges), chapter 11.

Not long after the Jewish people first settled the land, during the period of the Judges, the nation of Ammon raised an army against the Jews of Gilad, which was located on the other side of the Jordan River. The elders of Gilad were terrified, and pleaded with Yiftach to lead them into battle. Yiftach was a rough fellow who had been driven out of the land by his own brothers, but he eventually agreed to help those who had previously betrayed him.

Yiftach sent a message to the king of Ammon asking why he was picking a fight against them. The king responded that the Jews had stolen their land when they left Egypt, and demanded that they “return it to them in peace”. (Verse 13)

Sounds eerily familiar.

Yiftach was by no means a Torah scholar, but he had strong Jewish pride and faith in Hashem. It would not be unreasonable to compare and contrast him with some of modern Israel's not-so-religious heroes.

Yiftach's response to this land for peace proposal was essentially three-fold:

1) The king of Ammon was distorting history and inventing a false claim of ownership. Yiftach surely knew that giving him a history lesson and setting the record straight would not result in an apology for an honest mistake. Hence, Yiftach's reply was meant to demonstrate that the Jews would not cater to false accusations.

2) Hashem, our God, drove out people from our land to give it to us as an inheritance. The nation of Ammon keeps the land that their god gives them as well. Why should the Jews relinquish their inheritance that Hashem had given them?

This is something of a cynical retort, for Yiftach in no way meant to imply that the god of Ammon was legitimate. The message here is clear: it's our God versus your god. Let the stronger God win. We're not giving away what He gave us.

3) Your predecessors understood that this was our land. What makes you think you are superior to them to challenge our rightful ownership after all these years?

Yiftach clearly recognized land for peace as a declaration of war. Instead of trying to negotiate a gradual defeat for Israel to avoid an immediate war, he utterly rejected the demands. You want the land? Come and get it.

The next verse says that “a spirit of God” settled upon Yiftach. He struck a mighty blow to Ammon, “and the sons of Ammon were humbled before the sons of Israel.” (Verse 33)

Yiftach – who, it must be emphasized, was neither a prophet nor a sage – rejected the surrender that is called land for peace, put his trust in God, and defeated the enemies of Israel. Then there was peace.

Chapter 29 Military Service

One of the major controversies in modern-day Israel is whether or not men who study Torah on a full-time basis (or purport to) should be exempt from military service.

It is understandable that a Torah-observant Jew can have serious reservations about joining the army. In recent years the army has been against its own people to expel Jews from their homes and destroy Jewish cities. To this day the greatest threat to many Jewish neighborhoods in Israel is the very military charged with defending them from Arab enemies.

Indeed, in the entire history of modern Israel, with all its wars, the Arabs never succeeding in destroying or capturing a single Jewish city. Only Israel's own government and military carry that distinction.

Another serious issue with the Israeli army is that it is often handcuffed by the government. Due to the current political culture of capitulation, Israeli soldiers face severe restrictions on their use of force against enemies. Soldiers who fight to win, instead of merely trying to stay alive, risk prosecution. It is hard to blame someone for being unwilling to risk his life for the foolish, world-pleasing agendas of politicians.

Of course, this same army continues to fight against our true enemies, and it is an incredible merit to participate in this holy work. All those who are capable should be honored to share in this tremendous *mitzva*.

If someone objects to joining the army based on the above considerations, he should not be condemned. It is a legitimate perspective. The abuses of the government and the army against their own people should not be callously disregarded just because in principle we support the government and the army. Those who grant pardon to them share in their crimes.

However, the current controversy in Israel does not center around conscientious objection to the expulsion and ongoing harassment of our finest citizens. It centers around the belief of many that people who engage in serious Torah study (or purport themselves to) have better things to do than fight for the land of Israel. They believe that they are so holy that they already contribute their share to Israel's military protection. They believe that they should not “waste their time” in the army when others, whose time is less sacred, can serve on their behalf.

How incredibly arrogant for anyone to express such sentiments!

No true Torah leader would ever express such opinions about himself, let alone about a large society of people who are, for the most part, nothing special.

We should not blame anyone who has an issue with military service on certain ideological grounds that are hopefully temporary. However, those who are against military service in principle are terribly, terribly misguided – and must distort the Torah to find support from it.

The holier-than-thous portray themselves as the only authentic students of Torah, and they portray the matter of serving the country as an attack on Torah. Not only is this a sinister propaganda tactic to demonize those who disagree with them, it a distortion and terrible affront to the very Torah they claim to protect.

Lest we get bogged down in an unnecessarily exhaustive treatment of the topic, we will mention a few sources from the Book of Yehoshua (Joshua) that are particularly relevant.

One of the sources they are most fond of citing is a Midrash based on chapter 5, verse 13 in the Book of Yehoshua. As the Jews camped outside Yericho, preparing for their first major battle to conquer Israel, an angel appeared to Yehoshua with his sword drawn. According to one Midrash, this was meant to signify that the Jews were guilty for being lax with their Torah study.

Of course, they will never cite Radak's comments. Since these words do not suit their agenda, they do not exist.

“This Midrash is far-fetched, for wartime is not a time for Torah study.”

But of course. This is something we should not even need to be told. Suggesting that even Torah scholars – perhaps especially Torah scholars – participate in the fight for Israel is not an attack on Torah, but a fulfillment of it. Naturally this participation will require a compromise on the amount of time one can study Torah. So what?

Radak further writes that the author of this Midrash is “mistaken” because his Midrashic narrative with Yehoshua and the angel is based on a similarly worded verse from a different chapter that has nothing to do with this episode.

In essence, the point that Torah study is very, very important is indisputable. But that Torah study should trump fighting a war against Israel's enemies is baseless. The same God who gave us the Torah will make sure that there is ample time for both holy pursuits.

No less a figure than Calev expressed his ability to fight at the age of eighty-five (chapter 14, verses 10-11). If he wished to retire after an illustrious military career and study Torah all day, no one would have had any complaints against him.

In chapter 15, verse 16 Calev offered his daughter in marriage to the man who would conquer Kiryat Sefer. Otniel ben Kenaz stepped forward and conquered the city – the same Otniel ben Kenaz who was such an outstanding Torah scholar that he deduced numerous Jewish laws that were forgotten after the death of Moshe.

Anyone with even a moderate background in Torah study will know that our history is filled with outstanding Torah scholars leading the way into battle. Their scholarship and love for Torah is never used as an excuse for them to refrain from participating – not once. On the contrary, there are numerous examples of righteousness of the soldiers being a vital requirement for participation in war, to the extent that those who might be referred to as “secular” are told to go home! (See Shoftim, chapter 7, where Hashem repeatedly commands Gideon to whittle down the size of his army to a skeleton crew of righteous men.)

Based on these and numerous other sources, those who consider themselves guardians of the Torah should be asking everyone else to stay home while they alone fight for Israel!

There is much more that can be said on this topic, but what this controversy really boils down to has nothing to do with Torah-based arguments. It has to do with many people refusing to accept that Hashem loves the very Jews they reject, and loves the country even though they don't control it.

This is a bitter pill for them to swallow, one that would require serious soul-searching, fundamental changes to their philosophy and lifestyle, and a reduction of the power and control their leaders have over them. Ultimately these developments would lead to greater brotherhood and a greater love for Torah among those who are turned off by the hatred and hypocrisy of these fringe elements masquerading as torch-bearers.

We hope and pray that this will somehow happen in our days.

Chapter 30 **Take the Gift**

The Book of Yehoshua records the initial conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel. Although the Jews received miraculous protection during their battles, and the occupying nations posed them no threat, they failed to conquer and settle the entire land. These “Palestinians” who were allowed to remain became thorns in the sides of the Jews – just as the Torah warned would happen – and constantly terrorized future generations.

There is a startling section of three verses toward the end of Yehoshua, after the land is mostly conquered and divided among the tribes:

“And Hashem gave to Israel all the land that He swore to give to their fathers, and they conquered it and settled in it. And Hashem gave them respite from all who surrounded them as He swore to their fathers. No man stood before them; Hashem gave all their enemies in their

hands. Nothing was lacking from all the good things that Hashem spoke to the House of Israel; everything was fulfilled.” (chapter 22, verses 41-43)

The problem with these verses – that the job remained far from finished – is obvious, yet almost none of the commentators bothers to raise it. This is because the answer is also obvious. Ralbag spells it out for us:

“Even though many [of the enemies] remained in [the land], as was mentioned previously, this does not contradict what is written in this place, for all the nations that fought against them fell into their hands. Indeed, some remained due to the laziness of Yehoshua and the Jews, not due to a removal of Hashem's providence from them.”

These verses express that, as far as God is concerned, He gave the Jews the entire land as He promised them. The fact that they neglected to take it in no way detracts from Him having fulfilled His word.

It is easy to blame God for the situation in Israel not being more favorable. It takes more courage to examine whether He has offered us far more than what we have, and the real problem is that we have failed to take it.

Chapter 31 **The Miracle That Didn't Happen**

Much of the Book of Yeshaya is devoted to the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem in the time of King Chizkiyahu. The Jews were no match for the massive enemy forces and faced total destruction.

Much like today, many high-ranking Jews committed treason against their own people and tried to ingratiate themselves (“make peace”) with the Assyrians. Much like will be in our times, those Jews didn't have a happy end.

Chizkiyahu was a righteous king, and although he took whatever defensive measures were available to him, he put his trust in God. God did not disappoint. An angel struck dead the entire Assyrian army, save a handful of survivors to go home in shame.

This could have been the war of Gog Umagog that we know will precede the times of Moshiach, and Chizkiyahu could have been Moshiach. Unfortunately, the generation wasn't worthy of it, so the many glorious prophecies in the Book of Yeshaya about the coming of Moshiach were not fulfilled at that time.

The end of chapter 48 deals with the return from Bavel many years prior to the actual exile:

“Go out from Bavel, run away from Chaldea. With the sound of praise, tell this, make it heard, get [the message] out to the ends of the earth. Say that Hashem has redeemed His servant, Yaacov. And they did not go thirsty. He led them through desolation, [but] He made water flow for them from the rock. He split the rock and water flowed.”

These verses illustrate the triumphant journey back to Israel – at least, the triumphant journey that was supposed to happen. Radak makes the following comment:

“If this prophecy is referring to the captives from the exiles of Bavel, as it seems to be, it is astonishing. Why is this not written in the Book of Ezra when it tells of their leaving from the exile that these miracles were performed with them, that He split open a rock for them in the desert?”

As we have seen numerous times already, Radak is loathe to ever suggest that a prophecy was not fulfilled. However, the alternative – that it was fulfilled but not recorded in the narrative of the return to Israel – is also very difficult to accept.

This problem is so troubling that some commentators take this aspect of the prophecy in the past tense, not the future tense, as referring to the redemption from Egypt. The returnees from Bavel would thus be praising Hashem for helping them just as He performed miracles for their ancestors in the desert. The difficulty with this approach is also obvious.

Based on all we have learned, a more likely possibility is that the Jews could have returned to Israel with open miracles, and should have returned with open miracles, but they didn't

return in great enough numbers to warrant it. If the Jews didn't leave the exile in trickles, perhaps the rocks would have burst open and gushed water for them as well.

Once again, God did what He promised to do, and offered a great deal more as well, but the nation didn't reach high enough.

How high are we willing to reach today? How much redemption is enough for us?
It is truly our decision.

Chapter 32 Selected Lessons from the Midrash

We conclude with a few short lessons from the Midrash that are nevertheless of great significance. We saved these sources for the end because they would have diverted the flow of previous chapters, and also because burying them in tangents to other chapters would not do them justice.

There is much more that can be added to these sources, and we encourage the reader to continue his studies with the following principles in mind.

*

Where is Purim in this narrative?

Chapter 4 in Ezra mentions Shimshai as the scribe who wrote the slanderous letter to Persia warning that the Jews in Jerusalem planned to revolt. As a result of this letter a "building freeze" was imposed, as we discussed at length.

The Midrash in Esther Rabba, section 5 in the introduction, identifies Shimshai as the son of Haman.

Many people do not realize that the story of Purim happened after the Jews resettled Israel and began rebuilding the Beit Hamikdash. According to many, the story of Purim actually happened after the Beit Hamikdash was completed. In either case, this is incredible on many levels.

It further illustrates how oblivious most of the nation was to the opportunity that Hashem dangled before them. That they preferred Achashverosh and his parties over returning to their land – where significant redemption had already occurred – should shame us and sober us. History has repeated itself here as well.

It should not surprise us that these Jews faced destruction. What should surprise us is that Hashem performed miracles even for them, miracles that were worthy of an everlasting holiday being created.

This is the true cause of celebration, for the backdrop of Purim is really tragic. The Jews of Persia squandered the ultimate redemption, they were almost destroyed, and even their triumph is ultimately subdued. After all, Esther deserved to be a queen to a Jewish king, not wife to a Persian despot. Indeed, the *megilla* concludes not with the Jews riding the coattails of their victory back to Jerusalem, but with Achashverosh raising taxes and life continuing on in exile.

Let us celebrate Hashem's enduring love for us even then, but let us not lose sight of what could have been. And let us not repeat those mistakes any longer.

*

Like father, like son. Haman composed a virulent letter of his own against the Jews. After convincing Achashverosh to authorize the destruction of the Jews he sent a letter throughout the Persian empire accusing the Jews of all kinds of crimes against humanity from time immemorial. See Esther Rabba 7:13 for Haman's lengthy revision of history and twisting of the facts to rationalize genocide.

This is not merely of historical interest, but a warning to us today not to mistake the identical behavior of Haman's various reincarnations for "friends" who simply need to be educated. They know the truth, and they willfully distort it. If they patronize us, it is only to disarm us and prepare us for the slaughter.

Ignore our Torah's warnings and our own history at your own peril.

*

The nations of the world have always used lawfare against us to dignify their barbarism. An example that would be comical if it weren't reality to this very day can be found in Eicha Rabba 3:200 (page 53).

A certain Jew passed before Adrianus Caesar and greeted him. Adrianus asked him who he was, and he responded that he was a Jew. Adrianus expressed outrage that a lowly Jew would dare greet him, and ordered the Jew executed.

Another Jew observed this, and when he passed Adrianus he did not greet him. Adrianus once again asked him who he was, and he responded that he was a Jew. Adrianus expressed outrage that a Jew would dare *not* to greet him, and ordered the Jew executed.

Adrianus's own servants questioned his contradictory behavior, to which the Caesar retorted that they were trying to advise him how to kill his enemies.

It is unnecessary to provide copious examples of this scene played out in one form or another throughout our history. The point is for us to take note of the lesson today and to recognize that the nations of the world always stack the deck against us. Whatever Israel does will *always* be wrong in the eyes of the world so that they can justify their persecution of the Jews.

Instead of trying to play the game by their rules, let us recognize their hypocrisy for the seething hatred that it is and stop trying to please them at our own expense.

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Ah, but without the support of the nations Israel cannot survive. So the many faithless among us claim, pointing to certain times here and there when foreign nations provided support for Israel. They assume, of course, that without that support Israel would have been destroyed.

One can only wonder what God thinks when He hears such speech. If He had a head He would shake it sadly and wonder why His people prefer to grovel to foreign nations instead of trusting in Him and receiving far greater results. If only they wouldn't panic and run to enemies past and future to rescue them.

The books of the Prophets contain numerous examples of ancient Israel establishing treaties with foreign nations to protect them, even bribing foreign nations to protect them. Not once is this conduct portrayed in a positive light. On the contrary, it is the cause of future downfall at the hands of these very nations. Any help Israel received from its neighbors was short-lived and far more costly than it was worth.

Eicha Rabba provides one example of this in 4:20 (page 58). The ten tribes would bribe Egypt and Bavel with oil and grain to protect them from enemies. One time the Jews were under attack and sought help from Egypt. The Egyptians set sail across the Mediterranean towards Israel. Hashem caused skeletons to float up to the surface, and the Egyptians recalled that their ancestors died at the hands of the very people they were now going to help. The Egyptians turned around and went home, betraying their "peace partners".

What a waste of oil and grain.

When push comes to shove, the nations of the world cannot protect us and will not protect us. We can only rely on God, and the sooner we truly internalize this lesson, the sooner we can be liberated from our psychological bondage to the nations.

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How badly does Hashem want the Jews to return to Israel?

"When Israel would go out to war, Hashem would go out with them. When they angered Him, He did not go out with them. When the Jews were no longer in the land, He said, 'If only the Jews were with me, even if they were to anger Me.'" (Eicha Rabba 3:7)

This is a fitting conclusion to our analysis of Chagai, Zecharya, and Malachi.

Our ancestors from that time were given a partial redemption and offered a complete redemption. They did not seize the opportunity.

After thousands of years of exile, we have once again been blessed with a partial redemption, with the same offer of a complete redemption very much on the table. The creation of modern Israel is very much a fulfillment of Hashem's will, in spite of the ignorance and wickedness of many of Israel's leaders. It is also Hashem's will for the Jews around the world to

embrace this opportunity and return to Israel “like a wall”, to settle in the land, to build the land, to fight for the land.

The period of exile is over – if we truly want it to be.

The prophets speak to us loud and clear, urging us to shake off the shackles of servitude and not look back. If enough of us heed their words, we will merit the restoration of proper Jewish leadership, the true fulfillment of the many semi-fulfilled prophecies, and the ultimate redemption.

May it be soon in our days.