



Shavuot

God’s revelations in the Haftarot of Shavuot and the Torah reading for its first day (Exodus 19-20) terrified those who experienced them. They share elements such as God’s voice and light, yet also differ markedly. In the Torah reading, God descends a remote desert mountain to strike a covenant with His entire people and gives them laws. Many eras later, the 2nd day’s Haftarah takes place in the Land. God reveals Himself to a single person as a chariot warrior, descending from heaven to earth to execute justice for His people by defeating their enemies. A few years later alongside a river in Babylon, God reveals Himself in the 1st day’s Haftarah again to a single person. Amidst mysterious creatures, God also appears exiled to “His Place” in the heavens.

Day 1: Ezekiel 1:1-28, 3:12

More than a century after Assyria exiled the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Assyria’s successor, Babylon, again threatened from the north. Its initial conquests of the Southern Kingdom of Judah led to the exile to Babylon, in 597 BCE, of its king, Jehoiachin, and other leaders. Judah, Jerusalem, and the Temple still stood.

Five years later, God summoned Ezekiel, an exiled priest, to prophecy in Babylon with an astounding revelation that depicts detailed likenesses of His angels, throne, and even glimpses of His glory. In order to reach its final verse, the Haftarah skips two chapters describing God’s mission for Ezekiel to the people of Judah in Jerusalem and Babylon. The final verse describes a wind that transports Ezekiel while “behind” him, he hears that God’s glory is blessed “from His place.” As are His prophet and people, God’s exile from the Land has begun.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 1-3: Five years after Ezekiel and Judah’s initial exiles arrived in Babylon, God opened the heavens to show him a divine vision on 5 Tammuz, 592 BCE at the Chebar River.

Ezekiel 1:3	יחזקאל א:ג
The Lord’s word came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, by the Chebar River in the land of the Chaldeans. The Lord’s hand was upon him there.	הָיָה הַיְהוָה דְּבַר־הָאֱלֹהִים יְחִזְקֵאל בֶּן־בוּזִי הַכֹּהֵן בְּאֶרֶץ כַּשְׂדִּים עַל־נְהַר־כַּבְרָדָּן וַתְּהִי עָלָיו שְׁמַיִם יְדֵי ה':

Verses 4-9: Ezekiel sees a great, fiery cloud coming from the north. It is encircled by light, and electric flashes appear amidst its fire. He sees four angelic beings (“chaya”; plural, “chayot”) with human-like, dazzling bright appearances. Each has four heads, four wings with a human hand underneath, and a straight, calf-like foot.

Ezekiel 1:4	יחזקאל א:ד
I looked, and lo, a stormy wind came sweeping out of the north—a huge cloud and flashing fire, surrounded by a radiance; and in the center of it, in the center of the fire, a gleam as of amber.	וַאֲרָא וְהִנֵּה רִיחַ סַעֲרָה בָּאָה מִן־הַצָּפוֹן עָנָן גָּדוֹל וְאֵשׁ מְתַלַּקְחַת וְנִגְהָ לּוֹ סָבִיב וּמְתוֹכָהּ כְּעֵיִן הַחֹשֶׁמֶל מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ:

Verses 10-12: The four heads have faces of a human, a lion, a vulture, and an ox. Their paired wings face upwards, covering their bodies. Each chaya moves straight, without rotating, in the direction of the wind blowing it.

Ezekiel 1:10	יחזקאל א:י
Each of them has a human face [at its front]; each of the four has a lion’s face on its right; each of the four has an ox’s face on its left, and each of the four has a vulture’s face [at its rear].	וּדְמוּת פְּנֵיהֶם פְּנֵי אָדָם וּפְנֵי אַרְיֵה אֶל־הַיְמִינִי לְאַרְבַּעֹתָם וּפְנֵי־שׁוֹר מִהַשְּׂמֹאל לְאַרְבַּעֹתָם וּפְנֵי־נְשָׁר לְאַרְבַּעֹתָם:

Verses 13-21: Each *chaya* moves lightning-quick, back and forth. On each of its four bottom sides, an identical bejeweled “wheel with a wheel” determines whether it moves and its direction of motion- including upwards off the ground. Each *chaya* was tall, with eyes facing outwards in every direction covering its top.

Ezekiel 1:16	יחזקאל א:ט"ז
The appearance of the wheels and their structure are like a gem. All four have the same form. Their appearance and structure were like one wheel inside another wheel.	מראה האופנים ומעשיהם כעין תרשיש ודמות אֶחָד לְאַרְבַּעַתָּו ומראיהם ומעשיהם כְּאַשֶׁר יְהִיֶה הָאוֹפֵן בְּתוֹךְ הָאוֹפֵן:

Verses 22-25: Above the *chayot* is a firmament of “the fearsome ice.” A pair of each *chaya*'s wings spreads out under the firmament as another covers its body. A *chaya* is quiet when still, but when it moves, Ezekiel hears the water-like sounds of its wings, as well as a sound from above the firmament above it.

Ezekiel 1:22	יחזקאל א:כ"ב
Above each <i>chaya</i> 's head appeared a firmament [that looked like] the fearsome ice, spread out above their heads.	וְדָמוֹת עַל־רֵאשֵׁי הַחַיֹּת רְקִיעַ כְּעֵין הַקָּרַח הַנּוֹרָא נְטוּי עַל־רֵאשֵׁיהֶם מִלְמַעְלָה:

Verses 26-28, 3:12: Above the firmament over the *chayot*, Ezekiel sees a human-like figure on a sapphire-like throne. Its dramatic appearance differs above and below the thighs. An image of God's glory appears like a rainbow after rain. Overawed, Ezekiel prostrates himself and then hears a speaking Voice.

Ezekiel 1:26	יחזקאל א:כ"ו
Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this semblance of the throne, there was the semblance of a human form.	וּמִמַּעַל לְרִקִיעַ אֲשֶׁר עַל־רֵאשֵׁים כְּמַרְאֵה אֲבֹן־סַפִּיר דְמוֹת כֶּסֶף וְעַל־דְמוֹת הַכֶּסֶף דְמוֹת כְּמַרְאֵה אָדָם עֲלָיו מִלְמַעְלָה:

Connections

The **Mishnah** limits teaching the **mystical truths** of the Haftarah to **select individual sages**:

Mishnah Hagigah 2:1	משנה חגיגה ב:א
One may not expound upon... the work of the chariot in the presence of [even] one unless he is a sage who understands [it] with his own intellect...	אין דורשין... ולא במרכבה בניהד, אלא אם כן היה חכם ומבין מדעתו...:

Commenting on the Haftarah, Rashi states it is **forbidden to elaborate on its apparent description of Gods' glory**.

Rashi on Ezekiel 1:27	רש"י על יחזקאל א:כ"ז
Permission is not granted to contemplate this verse.	לא נתן רשות להתבונן במקרא זה:

The Haftarah **inspired many passages of the Siddur**, including **Kel Adon** recited on Shabbat morning.

First Blessing of Shacharit Shema on Shabbat (Ashkenazim)	ברכה ראשונה של קריאת שמע שחרית לשבת
[God is] exalted above the holy <i>chayot</i> , adorned in glory on the Chariot. Merit and equity are before His throne. His glory is filled with kindness and mercy.	הַמִּתְנַשֵּׂא עַל חַיֹּת הַקֹּדֶשׁ. וְנִהְדָּר בְּכְבוֹד עַל הַמְרֻכְבָּה. זְכוּת וּמִישׁוֹר לְפָנָי כְּסָאוֹ. חֶסֶד וְרַחֲמִים מְלֵא כְבוֹדוֹ:



Shavuot Day 2: Habakkuk 2:20-3:19¹

Habakkuk packs multifaceted and passionate messages into his book's 56 verses. The Bible reports nothing about him as a person; even his era can only be surmised. He defiantly challenges God's justice for allowing Chaldean (Babylonian) regional conquests and yearns for their punishment- yet he is silent about Israel's sins. Together, these suggest he was Jeremiah's contemporary, probably during or after King Josiah's reforms of Judah after the discovery of a Torah in the Temple in 621 BCE but before the partial Babylonian conquest of Judah in 597².

The Haftarah consists of the concluding, 3rd chapter of Habakkuk's book and the verse preceding it. With astonishing anthropomorphism, it poetically presents the revelation of God sweeping from the heavens into world affairs to punish Babylon. In hushed awe, Earth and humanity wait for God's arrival. God's radiant glory appears from Judah's south, similar to the revelation at Sinai commemorated on Shavuot.

God then storms in as an armed chariot warrior, creating upheaval and terror on air, land, and sea. God's ferocious attack on Babylon and its leaders is shockingly violent. God's punishing fury stems, in part, from Babylon's joy in using its brute military force to devour Judah and other weaker nations, just as the powerful oppress or kill the poor and weak with impunity. The terror of this revelation and the additional destruction it will bring causes Habakkuk physical agony. Nonetheless, God's display of His justice apparently answers the bitter reproach against God's refusal to punish the wicked as they oppress the innocent which Habakkuk flung at God in his book's opening lines. He therefore thanks God for strengthening him and exults with renewed trust in God.

Unusually for a prophetic book, chapter 3 of the Haftarah includes words typically or exclusively found in Psalms: שְׂגִינֹת in verse 1, לְמִנְצָה בְּנִיגִינוֹתָי in its final verse, and סֵלָה³ in verses 3, 9, and 13. The precise meanings of these terms are generally unclear, as is the significance of their usage in this particular chapter.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 2:20-3:2: Awaiting God's intervention from heaven against Babylon, the entire earth is hushed. Knowing God's power, Habakkuk gives voice to Israel's hope that God spare them while wrathfully punishing Babylon.

Habakkuk 3:2	חבוקק ג:ב
O Lord, I have heard a report of You. I feared, O Lord, Your works. Revive them within [a few] years, let them be known within [a few] years! In wrath, remember compassion.	ה' שְׁמַעְתִּי שְׁמַעְתִּי יְרֵאתִי ה' פְּעֻלָּה בְּקִרְבֵּי שָׁנִים תְּחִיֵּהוּ בְּקִרְבֵּי שָׁנִים תּוֹדִיעַ בְּרִגְזוֹ רַחֵם תִּזְכּוֹר ⁴ :

Verses 3:3-4: The prophet envisions God's arrival from heaven, first at Teman (in Edom, to Judah's southeast) and then at the Paran desert (in the southern Sinai). Heaven and earth reflect God's brightly radiant yet hidden glory.

Habakkuk 3:3	חבוקק ג:ג
God comes from Teman and the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah. His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise.	אֱלֹהִים מִתֵּימָן יָבֹא וְקֹדֶשׁ מִהַר־פָּאָרָן סֵלָה פִּסְהָ שָׁמַיִם הוֹדוּ וְתַהֲלֵתוּ מְלֶאכֶה הָאָרֶץ:

¹ Some synagogues recite a liturgical poem, Yatziv Pitgam (Aramaic: יציב פתגם), between verses 3:1 and 3:2.

² Seder Olam Rabbah (20) places him a generation earlier, during the reign of the wicked King Manasseh.

³ The translation of Selah is debated. Targum Yonatan (*ad loc*) renders it as "forever". Septuagint, Da'at Mikra, Malbim, and Radak identify it as a form of lingual punctuation or musical notation.

⁴ The phrase, "בְּרִגְזוֹ רַחֵם תִּזְכּוֹר" ([Even]in Your wrath, remember [to have] compassion)", is part of the weekday Tachanun prayer.

Verses 3:5-11: God arrives on horses and chariots, bearing spears, bows and arrows. The earth shakes, mountains shatter and are brought low, seas and rivers roar in upheaval; even the moon and sun stand still. Nations tremble.

Habakkuk 3:8	חבקוק ג:ח
Is the Lord angry against the rivers? Is Your anger against the rivers? Is Your wrath against the sea? [Such that] You ride upon Your horses, Your chariots of salvation?	הַבְּהָרִים תָּרַהּ ה' אִם בְּנְהַרִים אִפְּךָ אִם-בַּיָּם עֲבַרְתָּךְ כִּי תִרְכַּב עַל-סוּסֶיךָ מִרְכַּבְתֶּיךָ יְשׁוּעָה

Verses 3:12-15: Striding angrily upon the earth as His chariots churn the sea, God saves His people by smashing Babylon and their homes. For rejoicing as they anticipated devouring Judah with impunity, God pierces Babylon's leaders' skulls with their own weapons.

Habakkuk 3:13	חבקוק ג:י"ג
You have come forth to deliver Your people, to deliver Your anointed. You will smash the roof of the villain's house, raze it from foundation to top. Selah.	יִצְאֵתָּ לְיִשְׁעַ עֲמֻךָ לְיִשְׁעַ אֶת-מְשִׁיחֶךָ מִחֲצֹתַי רֹאשׁ מִבַּיִת רָשָׁע עֲרוֹת יְסוֹד עַד-צִנּוֹאֵר סְלָה: (פ)

Verses 3:16-19: Habbakuk's body convulses from the terror of his vision, and the damage that it will cause to crops, animals, and people. Nonetheless, he rejoices in God, his savior and supporter.

Habakkuk 3:16	חבקוק ג:ט"ז
I heard and my bowels quaked, my lips quivered at the sound, rot entered my bones, I trembled where I stood. I wait calmly for the day of distress, for a people to come to attack us	שָׁמַעְתִּי וַתִּרְגַּז בְּטֶנְי קוֹל צִלְלוֹ שִׁפְתַי יָבוֹא רָקַב בְּעַצְמֵי וַתַּחַתֵּי אֲרַגְזוּ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִיחַ לַיּוֹם צָרָה לְעֵלוֹת לַעַם יִגְדְּלוּ

Connection

Noting the geographical parallel between Moses's poetic description of God's revelation at Sinai to the Haftarah's description of God's revelation, the Talmud states that **God offered the Torah to other nations before the Jews.**

Avodah Zarah 2b	עבודה זרה ב עמוד ב
The nations will say before God: "Master of the Universe, did You give us the Torah and did we not accept it?" [Since we never received the Torah, why are You judging us for not fulfilling its mitzvot?] But can one say that [they were never offered the Torah? After all,] (Deut. 33:2) states, "And [Moses] said: "The Lord came from Sinai and rose from Seir unto them," and (Habakkuk 3:3) states: "God comes from Teman, and the Holy One from Mt. Paran?"! What did God require in Seir, and what did He require in Paran? Rabbi Yohanan said: "This teaches that [God] presented [the Torah] to every nation and [speakers of] every language, but they did not accept it- until He came to Israel and they accepted it.	אומרים לפניו רבש"ע כלום נתת לנו ולא קיבלנוה ומי מצוי למימר הכי והכתי' (דברים לג, ב) ויאמר ה' מסיני בא וזרח משעיר למו וכתיב (חבקוק ג, ג) אלוה מתימן יבוא וגו' מאי בעי בשעיר ומאי בעי בפארן א"ר יוחנן מלמד שהחזירה הקב"ה על כל אומה ולשון ולא קבלוה עד שבא אצל ישראל וקבלוה

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