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ישעיהו
ISAIAH

PROPHET OF RIGHTEOUSNESS
AND JUSTICE

Translated by Sara Daniel

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Preface

This book seeks to enrich the encounter between the contemporary Jewish reader and his or her ancient heritage, which is rooted in the Bible.

This encounter is critical for the formation of our Zionist identity with a foundation of sufficient depth and breadth. Zionist society crystallized as a result of the meeting between the Jew and the ancient biblical soil. The State of Israel sprung up out of this consciousness. During the years that followed the establishment of the State, however, society became estranged from its heritage and from the Bible in particular. On the religious front, many perceived Bible studies as a “secular” pursuit, mainly due to the assumptions made in academic circles about the human authorship of the Torah, and the focus on identifying apparent historical discrepancies in the Bible. On the secular front, many feared that the Bible had been “conquered” by the religious world, and was no longer relevant to the lifestyle of the new Israeli.

Recent years have seen an important shift in this paradigm, as the stalwart walls of alienation have begun to crack. The fissures in these walls have created an opportunity for new literary dialogue, which has the power to admit all who wish to enter.

The book you hold in your hand is the product of a dialogue between two very different people, an unlikely partnership. One of us is rooted in the world of exegesis, while the other is drawn to the world of literature. Nonetheless, the storyteller is fond of exegesis, while our exegete craves a good story. Bearing in mind that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, this encounter motivated the creation of a joint work. Competing discourses gave way to a new language of collaboration and joined hands. The creation of this book demanded that we internalize the principle of “less is more.” As we worked, we learned how to conduct even the fiercest of arguments with respect, even love. We pray that this book truly reflects this joining of forces, and that our toil and efforts will indeed blossom and bear the fruit we prayed for.

One of the figures who helped shape our worldviews was Rabbi Yehuda Amital, of blessed memory. For both of us, he was a model of love for Israel, love for Torah, and deep responsibility towards the State of Israel and its institutions. Rabbi Amital was the person who, when founding Yeshivat Har Etzion, made sure that the Bible was given pride of place in the study hall, without apologies. Under his instruction, Bible study became a requisite, integral part of the yeshiva curriculum, and of the worldview of the Torah Jew. He is deeply missed. It is with great love and respect that we dedicate this collaboration to his memory, and wish his entire family a long and fruitful life.

The first three parts of this book focus upon the prophecies that are closely and directly related to events of Isaiah’s own time. The first thirty-nine chapters of the book fit this definition. Chapter Forty and onward are referred to as Chapters of Consolation, and transport the reader to prophetic heights far beyond Isaiah’s lifetime, toward the distant future of the people’s redemption in the Land.

We would like to thank the translator, Sara Daniel, and the team at Maggid Books – Matthew Miller, Reuven Ziegler, Ita Olesker, Shira Finson, Orritt Sinclair, and Carolyn Budow Ben-David – for their hard work in producing the English edition of this book.

The Hebrew edition of this book was originally published in the days leading up to Yom HaAtzma’ut. The Declaration of Independence reads thus:

Preface

The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel.

There is no doubt that the prophet Isaiah and his visions were one of the leading motivators behind this statement, and behind the characterization of a State that gathers in its exiles and strives for freedom, justice and peace.

We consider this our modest offering to the State of Israel on its birthday. May our reflections upon the history of our people and the words of its prophets be fruitful and meaningful, and may the ship of independence drop anchor and arrive at its harbor upon the shores of peace.

Yoel Bin-Nun

Binyamin Lau

Isaiah Prophecies in Jerusalem (750 BCE)

Isaiah son of Amoz stood in the courtyard of his study house in Jerusalem. He stared up at the new towers that broke the northern skyline of the city. Immaculate soldiers in crisp Judahite uniforms stood in the nearby square. They bore shiny weapons, the likes of which had not been seen in Jerusalem for decades. This was the new Royal Guard, the keepers of the new towers and of King Uzziah's palace. The young soldiers, like the students who thronged to his study house, could not remember the bleak darkness that had once engulfed the city. Isaiah himself could only remember the great excitement that had followed that period. He and his cousin Uzziah were born in the midst of the revolution.¹

MEMORIES OF DAYS OF DEVASTATION

Fifty years earlier, at the turn of the eighth century BCE, no one referred to Judah as a "kingdom." Residents of the south were vulnerable to Amalekite and Edomite attacks, and to being kidnapped and sold as slaves along the eastern trade routes. Arameans threatened the northern front,

1. Isaiah's personal background and his blood relation to Uzziah is based on Sota 10b, "Amoz and Amaziah were brothers." It is evident that out of all the prophets, Isaiah was the closest to the throne.

The Days of Uzziah

oppressing the residents of the Galilee and Gilead. Judah's northern neighboring state, Israel, hovered at the brink of destruction. The Arameans overwhelmed their land with merciless chariots, and there seemed to be little hope of overcoming their tyranny. Everyone could sense that the end was near, and no neighboring state volunteered to help Israel. The ears of the oldest citizens still rang with the prophet Elisha's harsh warnings that described what King Hazael of Aram would do to Israel:

Because I know what harm you will do to the Israelite people: you will set their fortresses on fire, put their young men to the sword, dash their little ones in pieces, and rip open their pregnant women. (II Kings 8:12)

The Aramean army soon crushed the Israelite army, leaving only fifty riders and ten chariots intact (II Kings 13:7). The Kingdom of Israel was on the verge of collapse. Judah witnessed the destruction of its sister-state, Samaria, and knew that its end was also imminent. King Hazael of Aram had already conquered Gath, the neighboring Philistine city, and was headed towards Jerusalem.

THE REJECTION OF JEHOASH AND THE ASCENSION OF AMAZIAH, THE FATHER OF UZZIAH

Then, suddenly, everything changed. The Aramean army left the area, and its soldiers marched to a new, unexpected front. The Assyrian Empire had encroached upon Aram's northern border, threatening its very existence. The border between Aram and Israel was suddenly abandoned in Aram's fight for survival. Assyria's attack had saved Israel and Judah, and the echoes of war faded from the Jerusalem streets. All was quiet; the land was saved.

The ensuing days were wrought with confusion, as panic followed the momentary relief. The Judahite officers who had stood on the coastal frontline returned to the city, and spread the report of their frustration at the king's weak military conduct. In Jerusalem, in the Temple itself, a prophet-priest was murdered for condemning the king's departure from the path of the Torah. Rebellion led to Jehoash of Judah's assassination by his own servants. Isaiah's earliest memories were of his uncle Amaziah sitting on the royal throne in Jerusalem, with his son Uzziah by his side.

Isaiah Prophecies in Jerusalem (750 BCE)

He remembered well the atmosphere in his home, everyone talking the military lingo of conflict and conquest. Amaziah strove to restore peace to the southern border and reopen the trade routes to the east, and the army began to prepare for largescale war. The political and intellectual figures bickered among themselves; should they form an alliance with their northern neighbors, the Kingdom of Israel? Isaiah was old enough to remember these debates well. The news that Edom had been conquered and its prisoners killed reached Jerusalem, and the city began to celebrate. At this point, Uncle Amaziah, heady with victory, challenged the Israelite king, Jehoash, who had also just been freed from the threat of the Aramean sword. Jehoash was not interested in war, but when Amaziah persevered, the two met in battle in Beit Shemesh, in Judah. Amaziah was captured by the Israelites, who brought him to Jerusalem as a prisoner of war. The humiliated Jerusalemites opened the royal and Temple treasuries to the Israelite victors. Thus, loaded with spoils and the triumph of victory, King Jehoash of Israel returned to Samaria. At this point, antipathy towards Amaziah gradually grew until he fled to Lachish, where he met his death. For the last fifteen years of Amaziah's life, his son Uzziah effectively ruled in his place.

Isaiah kept to his studies. There, in the study house next to the palace, physically close and yet far removed from politics, a holy fire began to burn within him. His nights were filled with visions and fiery revelations. In his dreams he saw the prophet Samuel turning Israel's hearts back towards their Father in heaven. By day, he would gather students to his classroom and fill their ears with the words of God.

THE WAVE OF CONSTRUCTION AND THE FORTIFICATION OF JERUSALEM

Until the age of thirty, Uzziah governed the royal household. His father had been cast out, driven to the fortified city of Lachish, while Uzziah's power grew. After his father's death, he decided to build up the defeated people of whom he was now the ruler, to transform them into an exalted nation. His vision created a new golden age for the once proud city. A frenzy of building lifted the nation from gloom to euphoria. Judah's military doubled in size and glory; the defense industry had never known better days. The people, encouraged, found new land to cultivate. Blue skies shone over the bustling kingdom.

The Days of Uzziah

During those early years, Isaiah was ensconced in his study house, although he did not fail to take delight in his cousin Uzziah's efforts to restore Judah's former glory. Sometimes, for his young students, he would attempt to conjure up a picture of Jerusalem in the old days; its gloom and shame. The new generation could not imagine the poverty. They were born into a generation of financial stability, of open, peaceful borders, and of prosperity and free trade. The kingdom spread out in all directions. Uzziah's construction exceeded that of all his predecessors. In addition to Jerusalem's fortification, Uzziah saw to the development of industry, to the construction of towers and strongholds in the desert, and to the paving of the roads leading to the new harbor in Etzion Geber, near Eilat. Only Solomon's kingdom could have competed with the power and might of Uzziah's realm.

The neighboring kingdom, Israel, also grew beyond recognition. Freed from Aramean oppression, it flourished and achieved a level of prosperity that it had not known for many years. This transformation was begun by King Jehoash and maintained by his son Jeroboam II, who ruled for over forty years, the longest of any king in Israel.²

Uzziah and Jeroboam maintained an unwritten agreement regarding the distribution of conquered territories. Judah sprawled all the way to the south of Edom and to the west of the Philistine lands. Israel conquered Aramean territory as far as Damascus and Hamat, and also spread into its Ammonite and Moabite borders. Both kingdoms felt invulnerable on every front.

DRUNK ON POWER

The years passed, with Uzziah and Jeroboam growing ever more powerful. By the mid-eighth century BCE, the two kings had become convinced of their invincibility. Gradually, drunk on their power, they began to lose proportion, their arrogance spiraling like the haughty towers of the city. The kingdom's glorious majesty descended into decadence;

2. For a description of Jerusalem's might and power in the days of Uzziah, see H. Raviv, *Society in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judea* (Jerusalem, 1993), 164–66 [Hebrew]. For a description of King Jeroboam II's reign, see M. Haran, "The Rise and Fall of the Kingdom of Jeroboam Son of Jehoash," *Zion* 31 (1966): 33–38 [Hebrew].

Isaiah Prophecies in Jerusalem (750 BCE)

corruption infiltrated the city's power systems, as those with means and power began to lord over those without. Underneath Jerusalem's golden veneer, rot had begun to set in. Those who held key economic positions developed close relations with those who had influence in the government, creating a tight, impenetrable inner circle that had the power to crush everyone beneath them. This circle was tight enough to conceal its violence and corruption from the eyes of the king, who sat upon his throne, reveling in the magnificence of his kingdom.

Jeroboam's arrogance is addressed in the Book of Amos, the Judean prophet, who paid a swiftly truncated visit to Samaria. Amos' prophecies, uttered during a time of tranquil prosperity, were met with indignant fury by the priests of Beit El and the Israelite government, and the prophet was ousted from Israelite borders: "Away with you, visionary!" (Amos 7:12).

At the same time, Isaiah also began to sense danger in the intoxicating power that had seized Uzziah and the citizens of Jerusalem. Uzziah ruled over his entire kingdom with a mighty hand, and all were in awe of him. Even the intellectuals and spiritual leaders of that generation, the prophets and their disciples, saw the kingdom's political and military power as the fulfillment of the divine will.

At this point, in the mid-eighth century BCE, decades after Uzziah's first victories and achievements, Isaiah first stood up in his well-established study house opposite the palace of the king, and began to prophesy.

