



Machshevet Yisrael – Survival or Endurance?

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I. Renovating the Study of *Machshevet Yisrael*

How do we think about God – about His role in our lives and our role in His world? These questions seemingly address the very heart of what it means to lead a religious life, and as such any attempt at formulating a coherent understanding of religious life should naturally investigate answers or approaches to these questions. Indeed, in our tradition we possess a wealth of source material that directly addresses these primary questions, and we include these various approaches under the general rubric of the study of *Machshevet Yisrael*.

Yet, as I will elaborate below, the standard modes of teaching *machshevet Yisrael*, which for the most part emphasize the teaching of the traditional rabbinic and medieval sources, seem to be inconsequential to the development of religious identity, especially among high school students. The study of the sources of *Machshevet Yisrael* does not succeed in engaging our students in the process of *Machshevet Yisrael* thinking, in the search for understanding the profound implications of religious life that led our greatest thinkers to compose these sources.

In response to this dilemma, I suggest a rethinking of the role of *Machshevet Yisrael* and its place in the Judaic Studies curriculum. I propose an integrated approach that attempts to employ the questions and approaches of *machshevet Yisrael* as the premise and basis of our learning in the classic Judaic Studies subject, in particular the study of Tanach. Perhaps we are not succeeding in teaching *Machshevet Yisrael* precisely because we treat it like the study of other Judaic subjects, namely as text analysis of primary sources. Alternatively, I would focus on the way *Machshevet Yisrael* thinking can allow us to draw out the implications of our other learning. In other words, I think we should structure the learning of other Judaic subjects around the essential questions raised and developed in the study of *Machshevet Yisrael*. In this way, I believe that we can both invigorate the study of *Machshevet Yisrael* as well as deepen our understanding of the religious outcomes of our other learning.

In order to explain this particular type of integration that I am suggesting, I will present a specific method of curriculum design that, to my mind, naturally lends itself to *Machshevet Yisrael* application. But first, a little background.

A. The role of Machshevet Yisrael

Over the past few years, the ATID research team under the guidance of Yoel Finkleman has investigated the role and impact of teaching *Machshevet Yisrael* to high school students. As a group, we strongly believe in the potential value of *Machshevet Yisrael* ideas and approaches to help our students develop a more sophisticated world view. As Finkleman writes in his “Toward an Agenda for Improving *Machshevet Yisrael* Education in North American Orthodox High Schools”:

The goal of teaching *machshevet Yisrael* in an Orthodox high school is to be formative and not merely informative. The goal is to help students develop an intelligent Jewish worldview, and to assist them in becoming committed, knowledgeable, reflective, and critical religious people. *Machshevet yisrael* comes into play whenever and wherever students’ are thinking about religious questions, whenever their religious worldviews are in formation. (4)

As stated in the title, Finkleman goes on to formulate an agenda toward improving *Machshevet Yisrael* education. Firstly he suggests attempting to clarify what in fact our students believe in and to some degree how they see their beliefs in connection to their schooling. Though the investigation for this project continues, the results reached from interviews with Israeli high school students during the 2006-7 academic year indicate a significant gap between *Machshevet Yisrael* instruction and the students’ world view. Most students found the *Machshevet Yisrael* instruction to be boring, tedious, and irrelevant to their actual concerns.

The situation in North American schools is further complicated by the lack of any standardized material for teaching *Machshevet Yisrael*. In fact there is no consensus as to whether *Machshevet Yisrael* should be taught at all and many schools have no formal *Machshevet Yisrael* instruction.

In sum, there is a conflict between the theoretical value that we see in machshava instruction and the facts on the ground. Even in places that do teach *Machshevet Yisrael*, the current state of *machshavet Yisrael* seems to fall significantly short of the above stated goals.

B. The Case for integration

I found further evidence for this conflict from my own experience and that of my colleagues teaching at the Fuchs Mizrahi High School in Cleveland. Though as a staff many of us saw the value in *Machshevet Yisrael*, we had determined that the formal classes on *Machshevet Yisrael* were not effective and were eventually discontinued. Instead we found ourselves introducing what we considered key *Machshevet Yisrael* ideas through other areas in the formal curriculum – especially Tanach – as well as through informal programming. Our experience demonstrated that introducing *Machshevet Yisrael* ideas as they naturally arose from the study of Tanach or other Judaic subjects seemed to more effectively engage our students in the issue. Instead of trying to address the nature of prophecy as an issue that students are supposed to care about, we would allow this issue to emerge when discussing Yishayahu’s prophetic vision in chapter six. In this way, the students would themselves often raise the question of what Yishayahu saw and what the prophetic experience is all about. Though we considered this the appropriate approach this effort was done in a rather ad hoc manner.

Our efforts happen to align with the fourth agenda item from Finkleman’s presentation which suggests developing an approach for integrating *Machshevet Yisrael* into other curricular subjects. This approach was initially articulate by Jason Knappel and Anne Gordon in their 2006 ATID project “*Machshevet Yisrael* in the ‘Regular’ Classroom.” In their essay they articulate the premise that all Judaic subjects naturally raise central philosophic question about our understanding of Judaism. They also outline a set of such issues as they emerge from the teaching of Breishit and provided suggestions as to what manner these issues could be

addressed within a *chumash* curriculum. Their work is full of great ideas, both in terms of material and an approach for treating philosophic material.

III. What is integration?

Based on Knappel and Gordon's work as well as my own efforts at integration, especially from my experience working on Tanach curriculum, I would like to reassess and more clearly define what we might mean by integrating *Machshevet Yisrael* into other curricula. What is the educational justification for such integration? As they write in their note, Knappel and Gordon's suggestions are not meant to replace "the quality teaching of *Chumash* and *Parshanut*" (3). Does this mean that in order to integrate *machshevet Yisrael* teachers need to find time to bring in more material when teaching Tanach? How is that possible and why should any teacher be expected to do that?

It is with this in mind that I would suggest correlating our efforts to introduce relevant *machshevet Yisrael* ideas with a particular curriculum building approach called "Understanding by Design" (UbD). To explain how these come together, I will address both the basics of the UbD as well as the conception of *Machshevet Yisrael* that I have in mind.

A. What is UbD?

In their book *Understanding by Design*, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe¹ advocate a reevaluation of the way that teachers think about curriculum design. It is not my purpose in this context to outline or critique their book or method in detail. Instead, I would like to focus on what I consider to be their critical premise and its implication for our issue of using *machshevet Yisrael* in Judaic studies curricula.

In short, Wiggins and McTighe suggest that teaching units should not begin with particular subject material or skill. Instead, teachers should think about what they would like the

¹ Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Alexandria, Virginia: 1998.

results of their teaching unit to be. And though there are ideas “worth being familiar with”, knowledge that is “important to know”, and skills that are “important to do”, ultimately, they suggest, teachers should be aiming to teach toward understanding, or what they refer to as “enduring understandings.” As they explain:

The term *enduring* refers to the big ideas, the important understanding, that we want students to “get inside of” and retain after they’ve forgotten many of the details. (10)

The authors continue to describe what they refer to as “filters” for determining what is worthy of understanding. They list four:

1. To what extent does the idea, topic, or process represent a “big idea” having enduring value beyond the classroom?
2. To what extent does the idea, topic, or process reside at the heart of the discipline?
3. To what extent does the idea, topic, or process require uncoverage?
4. To what extent does the idea, topic, or process offer potential for engaging the students? (10-11)

The authors devote some time to explaining each of these filters and further develop them throughout the book. However for our purposes, I think it is enough to emphasize that according to this approach teaching begins with ideas – and not just any ideas, but big, complicated, engaging ideas that mean more than a particular text, or body of information, or skill. It is the teacher’s job not simply to present these ideas, but engage the students in a layered process of uncovering and understanding. Beginning with the idea, or more specifically with questions about an idea that reflect its value and complexity, the teacher should design the learning in a way that provides students with the skills and abilities to begin to formulate responses to these questions.

B. What is *Machshevet Yisrael*?

To explain how this curricular approach relates in particular to the instruction of *machshevet Yisrael*, I would first like to make a basic formulation as to what we mean by

machshevet Yisrael. In this effort, I would turn to a seminal article from Eliezer Berkovitz² in which he attempts to define Jewish philosophy or *machshevet Yisrael*. The immediate context of his discussion is the question of what criteria can we use to determine if a particular philosopher is a Jewish philosopher or not. However, I am more interested in his formulation of what makes Jewish philosophy than his application to any particular thinker.

According to Berkovitz, *machshevet Yisrael* is the attempt to explain intellectually in human terms the primary events or facts of Judaism, which according to him can be boiled down to three – God, the Torah, and the Jewish people. Jewish philosophy is not these facts, but rather our attempts to understand them. In other words, *machshevet Yisrael* is the never-ending attempt on the part of Jews to make some rational sense of the primary religious events that define their existence as Jews.

As such, *machshevet Yisrael* is not the study of any particular source, but is an outlook or method of trying to articulate a theory of Judaism. The job of every thinking Jew is to attempt some kind of understanding of these brute facts of Jewish existence. Of course, the works of the Jewish philosophers present various attempts at the hands of our greatest thinkers at articulating an understanding of these facts and how they relate to each other, and as such we would be wise to consult them. But the goal is not the understanding of any particular text or even any particular approach.

C. How are they connected?

As explained above, Ubd expects that we organize our teaching units around ideas – that we guide students toward understanding ideas and not just covering material. This does not mean that all or most of classroom work is focused directly on these enduring understanding. Rather, it means the teachers must continually bear in mind the understanding

² Eliezer Berkovits, “What is Jewish Philosophy?” *Tradition*, 1961.

outcomes of their unit. This helps guide which material the teacher chooses and how that material is presented. Ultimately when approaching any set of defined material, the goal of the teaching is to train our students to be able to articulate meaningful and relevant ideas that emerge from their learning.³

As such, it seems that the Ubd approach is a natural fit for religious education. Don't we expect religious education to not only train our students in the technical skill of negotiating biblical and rabbinic sources – though that in itself is a rather demanding task – but rather, to articulate how these sources generate and inform our values and worldview, how they provide a direction for our lives? This kind of goal requires a thoughtful approach that allows students to integrate their learning into their own personalities – in short, to truly understand.

Now we are in a position to elaborate on the connection between *machshevet Yisrael* and other Judaic subject. For I would claim that the for the most part we view the major Judaic subjects – Tanach, Talmud, Halacha, even Jewish history – as sets of material or primarily defined texts. We teach Chumash Breishit or Mesechet Bava Metzia or Hilchot Shabbat. But what is the conception of Judaism that emerges from our teaching? What are our enduring understandings?

It is precisely here that we can turn toward *machshevet Yisrael*. Clearly, *machshevet Yisrael* ideas fit into this definition of enduring understandings. They are big ideas that don't have obvious answers and can be explored and re-explored from many angles. Based on Berkovitz's definition we can view *machshevet Yisrael* as a set of question that probe the "facts" of Jewish existence for understanding and meaning. These kinds of questions include: Who or what is God and what is His place in the world, in my world? What is the role of the Jewish

³ For more detail see chapter four where the authors outline their six facets of understanding.

people and what is their place in the world? What are the expectations that the Torah makes of us and how can we understand them?

Tanach and Halacha provide the primary sources for these events or facts that lie at the heart of Judaism. *Machshevet Yisrael*, conversely, presents the approach or theory that endeavors to formulate a coherent understanding of those facts. In other words, *machshevet Yisrael* attempts to articulate the enduring understandings that emerge from Jewish learning. We want to understand how the Tanach and the Halacha present God, the Torah, and the Jewish people – and in particular the nature of the relationship between them.

Now if this is the concept that we have in mind as we read the Tanach, or for that matter the Talmud, then our reading takes on a dramatically different color. I don't just want to know what the Torah says; I want to know what it says about God and His expectation of the individual Jew and the Jewish people as a whole.

Recasting the suggestions presented by Gordon and Knappel, I would say that that it isn't enough to find a place and time while teaching Breishit to address what they call the *machshevet Yisrael* meta-themes of the sefer. Instead, using the Ubd approach these meta-themes should serve as the touchstone for teaching Breishit; teachers should organize the curriculum around those and other big ideas. Breishit is not just a convenient place to talk about the foundations of the Jewish people and the Jews' role in the world. One of the primary reasons that I teach Breishit in the first place should be to address those issues.

Certainly learning is about teaching texts, but if we can't articulate how these texts contribute to and impact on our world-view then they will remain simply texts. And our teaching will remain text-analysis. By articulating the *machshevet Yisrael* ideas, or enduring understanding that support our approach to any particular learning we will be able to more coherently chart out a course through a particular text or subject matter.

IV. Example – Yishayahu Unit

At this juncture, I would like to attempt a translation of this theory of integration into an actual teaching unit. Using Sefer Yishayahu as an example, I will attempt to articulate a set of enduring understandings that guide my approach to teaching the *sefer* and inform my choices of which parts of the *sefer* to teach. Of course, these understanding will necessary reflect an approach to teaching Tanach in general. I will then present one unit within the curriculum as a way of demonstrating how this approach directly impacts on classroom instruction. Through this example it should also become clear how “classic” *machshevet Yisrael* sources can find a natural place in the curriculum.

A. Introduction to Yishayahu Curriculum – Understanding Yishayahu by Design

The study of *neviim achronim* is challenging for both teacher and student at many levels. Primarily because of its difficult language, instruction of these books often turns into translation *psukim* at worst or poetic analysis at best. In this curriculum I present an approach for teaching Yishayahu that begins with thinking about the enduring understandings for Tanach in general, for the study of *Neviim* and *Nevua*, and for the book of Yishayahu in particular.

Tanach

Let us begin with the most basic questions – Why do we learn Tanach? What are we looking to find in and through the text? Based on my experience as a student and teacher, I have come to formulate my approach to Tanach as follows: the Tanach presents, not the history of the Jewish people, as it is often viewed, but rather the history of the relationship between God and the Jewish people. This relationship is primarily expressed through the historical happenings to our forefathers and the Jewish people after them, which explains why much of the Tanach is indeed historical narrative. But the Tanach is not primarily about these events per se, but rather about how they express the nature of this relationship between God and the Jewish people.

Consequently there is particularly emphasis on the way in which God communicates to the Jewish people – the expectations that He sets for them, and His involvement in their lives.

Moreover, once we accept this premise, we can more easily articulate a reason why Jews should continue to study the Tanach. For if we have any desire to continue to develop our own relationship with God then we must understand to the best of our ability the background to this relationship.

With this premise, I will present a particular formulation of an enduring understanding for the study of Tanach that my colleagues Dara and Michael Unterberg and I developed. It reads as follows:

Tanach is the sacred literature of the relationship between God and Am Yisrael, through which we contextualize the present.

This formulation emphasizes both the premise of relationship and its continued relevance on Jewish life. It should also be clear how this understanding naturally touches and impacts on numerous *machshevet Yisrael* themes such as:

- What is the nature of God and His relationship to the world?
- What is the particular relationship between God and the Jewish people, and consequently the relationship between the Jewish people and the rest of the world?
- How do we value the relationship between the individual and God in light of His relationship with the Jewish people in general.

It is with this understanding and these questions in mind that I turn more particularly to the study of neviim.

Neviim

I mentioned above that the primary mode through which the Tanach presents the relationship between God and the Jewish people is through historical narrative.⁴ This emerges rather clearly from the historical movement that runs through the Tanach from Breishit through the end of Melachim. The history serves as the organizing principle of these books, through which the nature of the relationship is expressed. From the *toldot* of Breishit through the chronology of the kings in Melachim, the Tanach marches to a historical meter.

However, once we accept that the history is the framework but not the goal, we are much better prepared to understand the dramatic shift that occurs in the Tanach from Melachim to Yishayahu. At first glance this transition should be quite shocking. All of the sudden the chronology nearly disappears and instead the Tanach presents us a book of Yishayahu's *nevuot*. What happened to our history?

If we maintain that the story of the Tanach was never really about history, but really about the relationship between God and the Jewish people, this shift is not nearly as shocking (though it is noteworthy).⁵ If the story is really about relationship, then those moments when God directly addresses the Jewish people, when the dialogue is open, are critical for understanding that relationship. And in truth, the prominence of the prophetic dialogue does not suddenly emerge with the book of Yishayahu. It is evident, and central, starting from the beginning of Breishit.⁶

⁴ Obviously, in the Torah the narrative is balanced with a heavy emphasis on the commandments, and clearly the study of Torah needs to address the central role of mitzvot in the relationship between God and the Jewish people. In this presentation I have decided to focus on *neviim* and will therefore not directly address this issue.

⁵ Consequently, I would claim that this is indeed what our sages intended when they formulated the principle "אין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה" (Bavli Pesachim 6b). As we have demonstrated, the Torah, and the Tanach for the most part are indeed in chronological order and organized based on the chronological progression. But, since the point is not chronology, this organization principle is sometimes broken.

⁶ In fact, it is a rather effective method in teaching the narrative section of the Tanach to focus on the explicit communication between God and the Jewish people as a means of uncovering the primary message of the narrative.

So the book of Yishayahu brings to the fore the critical *machshevet Yisrael* issues of prophecy and the nature of the communication between God and the Jewish people that in truth are relevant for the entire Tanach and especially the study of *neviim achronim*. Our initial enduring understanding speaks of “sacred literature,” but for *neviim achronim*, as well as Torah and *neviim rishonim* but in distinction from the books of *ketuvim*, we need to explicitly address the prophetic nature of this literature. In particular, the shift from books of *neviim rishonim* that primarily revolve around the political leadership to books of *neviim achronim* that take the perspective of the prophet further opens up the issue of the personality of the prophet and who is worthy of being a *navi*. These issues need to be part of my presentation of this part of the Tanach.

Before focusing in particular on the book of Yishayahu, I would like to articulate another critical assumption that I have in teaching *neviim achronim* that further relates to the balance between chronology and prophecy in the Tanach. In a famous comment, our sages explain that only *nevuot* that were necessary for “generations” were written down.⁷ This comment can be interpreted to mean that only the “timeless” messages of the prophets were recorded, and as such these messages stand outside of any particular historical context. However, in light of what I have established, I would claim precisely the opposite – that the messages of the prophets can only be properly understood within their historical context. For these messages convey God’s particular reaction to a particular time. And if we fully want to understand the nature of our relationship with God as He has expressed it, then we need to know under what circumstances did He respond the way that He did. The *nevuot* that were recording are **relevant** for all

⁷ הרבה נביאים עמדו להם לישראל, כפלים כיוצאי מצרים, אלא, נבואה שהוצרכה לדורות - “בבבלי מגילת 14א - נכתבה, ושלא הוצרכה - לא נכתבה.”

generations in that they teach us something critical about the nature of our ongoing relationship with God. That does not mean that they are without context.

It is true, and significant, that by presenting a book that is organized around the prophecies of Yishayhu and not the story of the kings, the Tanach is telling us that messages are crucial. But in opening the book by telling us which kings Yishahau prophesized for, the Tanach at the same time definitively places Yishayahu within his historical context.

Consequently, I would refine our earlier formulation of the enduring understanding for the Tanach to relate specifically to the study of *Neviim Achronim* as follows:

Neviim Ahronim present the prophetic commentary about the relationship between God and Am Yisrael during a particular historical period, through which we contextualize the present.

This formulation emphasizes the unique role of the *navi* in evaluating and articulating the status or health of the relationship between God and the Jewish people in his day.

As mentioned above, this approach to *neviim achronim* brings to the fore questions about prophecy and prophets, and the nature of the communication between God and the Jewish people. Furthermore, given that much of the message of the prophets calls the Jewish people to repent and threatens punishment if they do not, these books also raise significant *machshevet Yisrael* questions about suffering, both on the national and personal level.

Sefer Yishayahu

In turning specifically to *sefer Yishayahu*, I would like to present an approach based on my understanding of the categorization of this book according to Chazal. Our Sages consider the book of Yishayahu to be כוליה נחמתא – completely consolation (Bavli Bava Batra 14b). At first glance this is somewhat surprising. There are certainly a number of prophecies in the book that

would be difficult to classify as consolation – Yishayahu rebukes and speaks of destruction and punishment as well. Yet, Chazal claim that as a whole the book is consolation.

What does that mean and how does that provide us with a perspective on what the book is really about? Why, indeed, do Yishayahu and other neviim give consolation to the people? What is the purpose of that kind of nevuah?

Moreover, I think it is quite reasonable and rather obvious to claim that when we speak about *nevuot nechama* we are in essence addressing the issue of *yemot hamashiach*. For *nevuot nechama* describe a redeemed world, precisely what we expect for *yemot hamashiach*. Indeed, it is the descriptions of *nechama* from the neviim that, to a large degree, form the basis of our view about what *yemot hamashiach* is all about.

I will leave the formulation of a particular enduring understanding for *sefer Yishayahu* until after I have outlined the unit, to try and more clearly show how it emerges from the learning. However, if we accept this basic premise of Chazal about *sefer Yishayahu*, then we already go into the book expecting to find out about *yemot hamashiach*. And there is no more pure *machshevet Yisrael* topic than *mashiach*!

In sum, I have tried to articulate the premises that I bring to the study of *sefer Yishayahu*, through which I will attempt to understand the sefer:

- The Tanach fundamentally addresses the relationship between God and the Jewish people
- Prophecy provides a unique articulation about the nature of this relationship and must be properly understood in context
- The book of Yishayahu is primarily about the future or destiny of the Jewish people.

These premises directly open up, and in fact build off of standard *machshevet Yisrael* issues – the nature of God and His relationship to the world, the nature and quality of prophecy, and the

nature and purpose of the ultimate redemption. I not only want to be aware of these issues as I teach, but I want to focus my teaching at some level as an attempt to uncover responses and approaches to these issues. I would now like to demonstrate that through a particular unit.

B. Sample Unit – Yishayahu Chapter Two

In presenting a unit from my Yishayahu curriculum, I have decided not to present the final form of the unit as I would present it to teachers or students. Nor do I want to get bogged down with particular exercises for teaching the text. Instead I would like to step through the stages of learning that demonstrate what I mean by integration – a commitment to the teaching of the text within the context of the broader enduring understanding or *machshevet Yisrael* issues – and how it impacts on both what and how I teach. I have attached a more detailed teacher's guide and worksheets in the appendix.

1. Context and Structure

Yishayahu 2 begins with a clear opening, indicating that it is the start of a new unit:

א הדבר אשר חזק ישעיהו בן אמוץ על יהודה וירושלם.

And for our purposes we will at least start with the assumption that this unit runs until the completion of this *perak*.

In this context, I do not intend to elaborate on techniques for reading and teaching the text of *neviim achronim*. Nevertheless, I will outline one approach. Instead of reading through the unit *pasuk* by *pasuk*, I would like to first get a sense of the structure of the unit. To do this, I begin by identifying a set of words or terms that could help me give a shape to the unit. In this case I will focus on time and character words, repetitions, and images. The stages of this reading are outlined in the appendix.

By identifying time words and characters in the unit, I can already see that there is a major split between the first four *psukim* and the rest of the *perak*. The first part is addressed to יהודה and takes describes a time referred to as אחרית הימים. The rest of the *perak* addresses

בית יעקב and talks about 'יום לה' and ביום ההוא which seem to refer to the same day. The split between these sections is reflected in the *parshia* break between *pasuk* 4 and 5. The second break between 11 and 12 seems less significant as 12 picks up on the same day mentioned in 11.

If I accept this major split, I can already begin to formulate the question: what is the relationship between אחרית הימים and 'יום לה'? Are they the same day or not? What is the relationship between them?

2. Close Reading

Starting with the first part of the *perek*, the אחרית הימים section, I want to now focus on the poetic images. These *psukim* present some of the most famous imagery about redemption – the nations of the world flowing to the exalted Jerusalem and the beating of swords into ploughshares among them. There is no question that these images present a vision or dream about how Jerusalem could ultimately look as the universally recognized center of justice and peace in the world. This section seems to be a classic *nevua nechama*, referring to a glorious, peaceful future.

The remainder of the chapter presents a much different picture. After calling בית יעקב to walk “by the light of God” the *navi* goes on to describe how they have failed to heed that advice. Following a poetic description of the endless wealth and power in the land (7), the *psukim* describe how the land also (or consequently) became “endlessly” full of idolatry. The continuation predicts what is presumably the punishment for this behavior – how man will be knocked down and attempt to hide in fear from the awesome presence of God (10). All of this will occur on that day when God’s exaltedness will be clearly evident to all, on that day of 'יום לה'. Verses 12-16 then detail to what extent God’s greatness stands above all other all earthly manifestations of greatness. The *navi* then returns to the fear of humanity in the face of God’s presence.

Though this prophecy refers to the future, and even a particular future in which God's presence will clearly fill the world, I think we can hardly describe this as a *nevuat nechama*. Instead it sounds like harsh rebuke for the overwhelming problem of arrogance and threatens to put the people in their place, beneath God.

3. Applying Enduring Understandings

At his point, I have a working understanding of the two main sections of the chapter, but I also have a significant question about the relationship between these two parts. In fact, it is not clear at all how or if these two sections are connected, and I might be tempted to try and reconnect the opening of chapter two, back to chapter one which also discussed a kind of *nechama*.

It is at this point that I would like to apply or invoke the assumptions or enduring understanding outlined above. For I am not reading Yishayahu chapter two in a vacuum. I approach the unit and the sefer as a whole already interested in prophecy in general and the concept of *nevuat nechama* and *yemot hamashiach* in particular. I am looking to uncover the meaning and implication of *nevuot nechama* and what they reflect about the nature of the relationship between God and the Jewish people. And I am committed to trying to place the prophecies of Yishayahu within a historical context in order to draw out their timeless message.

I will begin with the second point. Given that the opening section does not seem to correspond to any historical reality that we have known – we have yet to see the universal recognition of Jerusalem and its Torah – the second part of the chapter more easily lends itself for contextualization. So I now ask – to whom would it make sense for Yishayahu to give this prophecy of 'יום לה'? About whom would it be appropriate to say the land was filled with wealth and military power that ultimately led to arrogance? A perusal of the careers of the four kings that lived during Yishayahu's day clearly points to King Uzziyahu. He is the one whose endless wealth and power is described in II Chronicles 26. And he is the one who allows his success to

get to his head, as that same chapter describes how his arrogance led him to enter the sanctuary and attempt to usurp the role of the *kohanim* in bringing the incense.⁸

This association of chapter two with the time period of Uzziyahu, already dramatically changes its message, for Uzziyahu is called 'יִשָּׂר בְּעֵינֵי ה' (II Kings 15:3). And still, the *navi* connects his arrogance to idolatry and describes how God's wrath will ultimately show all that there is no human greatness to speak of in relation to God. By demonstrating that the prophet is addressing a righteous king, we can less easily dismiss his message as condemning people who we understand to be evil. Instead, we must relate to this message as one that addresses the religious, or at least the outwardly religious.

Moreover, now, I think we are in a position to return to the relationship between the two parts of this chapter and the significance of *nevuat nechama*. I would formulate the question (based on the above articulated assumptions) as follows: why would Yishayahu articulate this glorious vision of the end of days as a preface to his harsh condemnation of the generation of Uzziyahu?

Let me return to the central verses that describe the sin –

ז וַתִּמְלֹא אֶרְצוֹ כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב וְאִין קֶצֶה לְאַצְרֹתָיו וַתִּמְלֹא אֶרְצוֹ סוּסִים וְאִין קֶצֶה לְמִרְכָּבָתָיו. ח וַתִּמְלֹא אֶרְצוֹ אֱלִילִים לְמַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לְאֲשֵׁר עָשׂוּ אֲצַבְעֹתָיו.

Despite all of their wealth, and the possibilities that it opened, the land turned toward idolatry. In other words, we can describe the essence of the sin in this chapter as a failure to appropriately channel the success of the Jewish people toward the service of God. Instead they served themselves – *למעשה ידיו ישתחוו*.

⁸ Again, due to the nature of this presentation, I do not think this is the place to elaborate on the supporting evidence for associating this prophecy with the time period of Uzziyahu. I do believe that this is a relatively straightforward conclusion from having a sense of the historical context of the different kings for which Yishayahu prophesied. I will mention that I first heard this approach formulated by Rav Yoel Bin Nun in a lecture at the Yeshivat Choveveit Torah Yemei Iyun BeTanach in the summer of 2003.

What then is the role of the description of **אחרית הימים** at the opening of the chapter? Those verses describe the end toward which the resources of the Jewish people and their king **should** be dedicated. They reflect the vision against which the reality of the day of Yishayahu is judged. Consequently, the opening makes the rest of the chapter that much more damning. Yishayahu has articulated the vision of the end, the goal, and look how the generation of Uzziyahu has squandered their resources toward the pursuit of self aggrandizement.

If this is true, or at least possible, then I have begun to formulate a view of what *nevuat nechama* are all about. The articulation of the future as a vision is meant to impact on the present; if we know how the story is supposed to turn out then we should be working toward its realization in the present. What could be more critical to the description of our relationship with God than the articulation of the goal or end of this relationship?

I can further see how the book of Yishayahu can be called **כוליה נחמיתא** despite the many prophecies of rebuke. For Yishayahu as a whole articulate the vision against which he evaluates the present. And this then can be an approach toward how we relate to the biblical and rabbinic descriptions of *yemot hamashiach*. I would then formulate a working enduring understanding for the book of Yishayahu as follows:

In Sefer Yishayahu the *navi* formulates a(n eschatological) vision towards which the Jewish nation should strive, and he evaluates the kings of his time based on their (in)ability to live up to this vision.

Obviously, this formulation of the central goal or purpose of Sefer Yishayahu does not exempt us from studying the rest of (or parts of the rest of) the book. Instead it focuses my efforts. If this is indeed what Yishayahu is about, then I must pay close attention to the various ways in which he describes the ultimate redemption. What does each add and how do they relate to each other? How do they relate to and impact on the immediate circumstances in

which he is conveying his message? In particular I would compare this formulation of אחרית הימים with the description in chapters 11-12 and how those relate to some of the classic *nechamot* formulated from chapter 40 until the end of the *sefer*.

4. Classic *machshevet Yisrael* Sources

In the above presentation, I have tried to demonstrate at least to some degree how the learning of Tanach can be anchored in the ideas articulated by *machshevet Yisrael* in the broadest sense. I would further claim that if indeed I focus or structure my learning of Yishayahu on these kind of enduring understandings, and in the particular case of Yishayahu on the meaning and implication of *nechama/yemot hamashiach*, then the integration of classical *machshevet Yisrael* sources naturally flows from my teaching of the *sefer*.

As an example I would turn to the Rambam's description of *yemot hamashiach* from his Mishne Torah. In Hilchot Melachim chapters 11-12 the Rambam articulate a rather comprehensive view of *yemot hamashiah* that lies at the heart of any classical *machshevet Yisrael* account of *mashiach*. Given that the first Halacha in chapter twelve explicitly refers to a verse in Yishayahu chapter 11, a teacher could easily use that section in Yishayahu as a starter for discussing the Rambam's view and perhaps why he considered *mashiach* to be a fundamental of faith. In other words, the text naturally lends itself to integration.

However, in light of the approach outline above, addressing the Rambam's position during the teaching of Yishayahu is much more than an appropriate or convenient digression for discussing *mashiach*. For if I am really focused on the way in which Yishayahu articulates the messages of *nechama*, what they meant for his generation, and what they continue to mean for our own understanding of God, the Torah, and the Jewish people, then understanding the Rambam's particular view of *yemot hamashiach* is almost a necessity. I would claim that learning the Rambam in the context of Yishayahu can greatly assist our understanding of the *pshat* of Yishayahu as well as the position of the Rambam.

In broad strokes, the primary feature of the Rambam's view on *mashiach* is his strident dismissal of the role of miracles. He emphasizes this point not only about the days of *mashiach* in general in the halacha referred to above, but also in chapter 11 halacha 3 when discussing the *mashiach* himself. Now, as the Rambam himself claims in his Letter on the Resurrection,⁹ he has no clear tradition to support this view. However, I would claim he does have support from Yishayahu.

What does the Rambam mean when he makes his bold claim that *yemot hamashiach* does not need to be miraculous? In essence, I think he might mean that it is up to people – to us – to bring about *yemot hamashiach*. It is not a miracle that comes down from heaven. It is a king who does the right thing and leads the Jewish people toward their ultimate goal. That is why he explicitly refers to Rabbi Akiva's endorsement of Bar Kochva in (11:3) as perfectly reasonable and appropriate. For *mashiach* is not determined by external miracles, but by the degree to which he facilitates the fulfillment of the goals of the Jewish people.

That message, if you accept it, is precisely the message that we claim emerges from Yishayahu chapter two – that the nation in general and the king in particular need to employ their resources toward the realization of the vision of the end of days. And no one articulates that vision quite like Yishayahu. Seen in this light, the Rambam's position takes on new significance; it presents a critical endorsement of our particular reading of Yishayahu and is inherently relevant to the development of this approach. This example hopefully demonstrates the kind of integration I am looking for. Introducing the Rambam's position, and to the degree possible the actual texts in which he formulates his position, completely aligns with at least some of my ultimate goals in teaching Yishayahu.

⁹ Abraham Halkin, trans. *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985, p.223.

V. Toward an Integrated Machshava curriculum

The approach outlined above makes a significant demand on curriculum development. It expects that teachers have the ability and interest (and time and resources!) to articulate how the material that they are teaching both fits into and shapes our *mahshavti* view of Judaism. Of course, this demands that teachers have some sense of mastery of both the particular text of their course and the relevant *machshevet Yisrael* issues – neither of which is a given. Through my own experience I would claim that this kind of approach can only be attempted after a course has already been taught at least one time and more appropriately two or three times.

However, even the first time teaching a course, or attempting to develop a course in this fashion, it is possible to begin to think through the major issues that emerge from the text and the external *machshevet Yisrael* sources that might be relevant. The attempt to articulate some working enduring understanding or at least a set of essential questions can go a long way in directing a curriculum toward big ideas.

Of course the grand challenge that emerges from this approach is a fully integrated Judaic studies curriculum. For if all Judaic subjects are taught with an eye toward *machshevet Yisrael* implications then they all become interrelated. The relationship between the *machshevet Yisrael* implications of the different subject matters could be articulated if not into a wholly consistent view of Judaism, then at least into a coherent and complementary one. Moreover, from the *machshevet Yisrael* perspective you should be able to look across the different curricula and verify that you have indeed touched on all of the major *machshevet Yisrael* issues that you consider to be critical to developing a broad view of Judaism. Toward this end you could create a kind of master document that outline the *machshevet Yisrael* ideas that emerge from the units of each Judaic subject's curriculum.

By returning the study of *machshevet Yisrael* back to its natural location, as an outgrowth of the study of the facts of Judasim, I think that both students and teachers will more clearly be able to see the relevance and impact of the *machshevet Yisrael*.