

Bringing the Prophets to Life

Weekly insights into the Haftara by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler

Author of Bringing the Prophets to Life (Gefen Publ.)

Va'etchanan-Nachamu

With the haftara of "Nachamu" we begin the "Shiv'a d'Nechemta," the post-Tish'a b'Av readings of consolation that lead up to Shabbat Shuva, the Shabbat before Yom Kippur. Each one of these haftarot is taken from the Sefer Yish'ayahu and are aimed to lift us from the depths of depression and rejection to the heights of joy and acceptance. This journey of seven weeks is meant to be a time to repair our relationship with G-d that was, seemingly, torn asunder by the Galut, so that we would be prepared for the season of T'shuva.

Tosafot (Megila 31b) points out that these selections are arranged in ascending order, i.e., that each haftara progresses in its comforting words to the prophecies of the previous one.

In the opening words Hashem calls to the prophets: "Nachamu, Nachamu Ami", "[Go and] comfort My people", which certainly appears to be a most powerful message to the post-churban generation. In what way, we might wonder, is this selection any

less comforting than those messages that would follow? Let us consider:

The Temple lay in ruins.

The population was driven into exile.

And thousands of Jews were killed.

So the prophet calls for us to be comforted because... G-d has completed the punishment since you have already suffered twice as much as you deserved (KI LAK'CHA MIYAD HASHEM KIFLAYIM B'CHOL CHATO-TECHA").

Is this comforting? The Jews may have been relieved to learn that the punishments had ceased - but would that have been a "soothing comfort" for them?

Furthermore, the haftara focuses upon G-d's power and His ability to punish - but says nothing about His willingness to forgive! The perek also speaks of G-d's might and His ability to change nature - but does not speak of Israel's future redemption. And, whereas the other prophecies of comfort depict G-d's relationship with us as that of a father to his child or even husband to his wife, this haftara speaks in terms of a Ruler to his nation, an Almighty Power who judges the people - lacking the warmth and caring of a relationship the nation so desperately needed! In

but one verse alone does the navi paint the picture of G-d as a compassionate shepherd gathering His sheep and holding the wandering lamb in His bosom, portraying a warmer and more intimate connection between Hashem and His nation.

Perhaps this is why Tosafot regarded this prophecy as the least comforting of the seven. And, if so, then how, indeed, were they to be comforted?

I suggest that that Israel were comforted by Yishayahu's message because they, and future generations, for 2500 years, firmly believed in the in the words of the prophet that they WOULD have a future.

After the horrors of the churban and throughout the torment and torture of the Diaspora and incomparable pain they suffered, in was only logical for them to believe that they were doomed; that they had NO future. The simple promise they found in the words of this haftara gave them the strength and inspiration to go on.

They survived - because they knew that they would survive.

And we, more than past generations, can see these prophecies come to life. We see the fruition of those promises that our ancestors could only pray would come true.

Yes, we have survived and, therefore, can confidently declare to our nation:

"Nachamu, Nachamu Ami" - we all can now be comforted, for Yishayahu's prophecy has been realized. ✨