

Bringing the Prophets to Life

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

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

Shabbat Nachamu -

26 p'sukim, Yeshayahu 40:1-26

How Are We Comforted?

The first pasuk of this week's haftara that opens the fortieth perek of Sefer Yishayahu as well, marks a turn-around in the prophecies of the navi. Until this point, the messages Yishayahu shared with his people were ones of warning, filled with descriptions of the punishments that awaited them were they to continue in their sinful ways. From this verse onward the theme of the prophet becomes one of comfort and consolation. The bulk of these final chapters, as Rashi points out, are replete with description of the ideal world that awaits Israel as Hashem returns to them and returns them to the land.

However as I have pointed out in the past, these words of NACHAMU NACHAMU AMI were NOT addressed to the nation itself. G-d is not saying BE comforted my people but rather, it is a call to the prophets to go and comfort the people. Just as he charged Yishayahu to offer words of warning in his earlier visions so now he charges him to deliver warm words of comfort and solace.

And yet, the message of the haftara does not seem to be one of comfort at all. In fact, it appears to be no more than praise of Hashem: His power, His wisdom, His justice. Certainly, all of these attributes are impressive and important to know - but are they comforting to a bereaved and suffering people?

For years, I was troubled why this perek was chosen to open the post-Tish'a b'Av haftarot of comfort if there are few words of comfort and for succor for the mourning generation(s). Surely, Chazal could find more soothing visions, more encouraging messages (in Sefer Yishayahu alone!) that would be more fitting to introduce the weeks of comfort! Why then our Rabbis' choice of this perek for this crucial Shabbat?

When analyzing this chapter more carefully, I realized the logic of Chazal in choosing this haftara for this Shabbat. The ancients who experienced the exile and who suffered for the two thousand years that followed, words alone would sound empty and of little comfort for those who grieved so and who shed millions of tears. Promises, after all, are simple to make, but difficult to keep. Even the navi himself understood this and declares: KOL OMER 'K'RA' VA'OMAR - 'MA EKRA?' - A voice proclaims; 'Call out' but I say 'What shall I call?'" Yishayahu bemoans that

all of flesh is but dried grass now. What can he say to these generations to convince them that the promises of G-d would surely be kept?

And therefore, Hashem instructs Yishayahu to remind the people Who it is that's making these promises. The prophet proceeds to impress upon the people that it is the All-Powerful, the All Mighty, the All Capable, who is making these promises. The praises that fill the bulk of today's reading were meant to impress upon the nation - both of that generation and of future generations - that Hashem is THE power and, therefore, is capable of fulfilling all His promises, no matter how difficult it might be for them to believe. And so, before commencing on the next six haftarot that promise a bright future and a complete redemption for the suffering nation, Yishayahu insures his people that ALL the promises are true, are genuine, and will be realized.

Have you ever wondered what an ancient Israelite or a Judean would say if he were told that his people would be exiled from their land, persecuted, oppressed, pogromed and gassed for two thousand years... and then be taken to the Yerushalayim of today? We would have him walk around the construction cranes, dodge the oncoming traffic and hop on to the Rakevet Kala to get to the

Kotel. He would visit the Batei Knesset and hear the same Torah that he read, pass through the Batei Midrash and find Rabbanim analyzing the same mitzvot that he observed and listen to the words of the scholars echoing those of the prophets that he listened to. Would he believe his eyes?

Do we?

NACHAMU, NACHAMU AMI because the All Powerful is, as we see, keeping His promises! ✨