

Bringing the Prophets to Life

**Weekly insights into the Haftara
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Words of Prophetic Comfort

R'El - 12 p'sukim

- Yishayahu 54:11-55:5

In his study of the seven haftarot of consolation that follow Tish'a b'Av, the Avudraham [14th century, Seville] submits that the very opening words of each haftara reflects an ongoing theme of Yishayahu's visions of comfort. The first haftara demands that prophets cry out to the nation to be comforted: NACHAMU NACHAMU AMI, while the second haftara begins with Israel's response that there could be no Nechama for them because: AZAVANI HASHEM - G-d had abandoned them! And yet, despite the prophet's assurances that G-d could never forsake His children, and despite the fact that the very last message the navi gave to his nation was KI NICHAM HASHEM TZIYON - G-d has comforted Zion... Yishayahu realized that Israel had remained in grief! And, for that reason, he opens his vision of the third haftara with the words: ANIYA SO'ARA, LO NUCHAMA - Israel remains unconsolable.

But why was that true? Why was there no comfort for Israel in the promises of Hashem?

Rav Yigal Ariel points to Yishayahu's prophetic promises of a glorious future and wonders: "Why should Israel be comforted?" Or, more specifically: "Why should future generations of Israel be comforted through hearing the promises of a future glory?" After all, even if they return to the "good old days", even if they live to see the fruition of Yirmiyahu's plea CHADEISH YAMEMU K'KEDEM [Eicha 5:21] they would find themselves facing the same challenges of earlier generations - including the real possibility of repeating the same sins which would lead to the same punishments!

In response to that fear, the navi depicted a future for Israel that would be clearly different from that of past centuries. The reality of this promised future would be one far superior, far more glorious and even more miraculous than the world that was. Rav Ariel points to Yishayahu's promise: V'CHOL BANAYICH LIMUDEI HASHEM [v. 13], as the birth of new generations who would be imbued with, and inspired by, G-d's teachings. The navi guarantees that the future would not be a "repeat" of Israel's mistakes but would, instead, be a world that would build an idyllic future on which "all your children shall be disciples of Hashem."

Rav Moshe Lichtenstein, however, suggests a different understanding of the Yishayahu's promise of comfort for Israel. The last haftara, Rav Lichtenstein says, finds Israel's inconsolability based upon their assumption that Hashem had abandoned them, VATOMER TZIYON: 'AZAVANI HASHEM'. The navi succeeded in comforting them by assuring them that G-d would never do so - as reflected in his closing words: NICHAM HASHEM ET TZIYON.

This week's haftara, however, addresses a second concern of the nation. Realizing the poverty and lack that galut would bring, the people rightfully wonder how they could ever survive such an experience. No longer do they doubt Hashem's relationship to His nation but they do doubt whether they could endure such years of scarcity - as the opening words describe Israel as ANIYA SO'ARA, poor and turbulent. How beautifully does Yishayahu relieve their concerns by promising future prosperity and success, including precious stones and "windows of jasper" [54: 11-12].

The divine words of the prophets respond to the needs of the people... and their concerns. Messages of comfort may not reach each generation in every era. But the simple knowledge that there WILL BE a future for Israel is, indeed, a source of comfort.

Perhaps, that is why we stand here today, living in the same land, speaking the language and thanking the same One G-d, some 2700 years after Yishayahu offered those prophetic promises! ✨