

Haftarah Helper 5780: Vaetchanan

Zachary Beer (Nachshon Project Fellow, The City College of New York) and
Barry Kornblau (Rabbi, Young Israel of Hollis Hills-Windsor Park, Queens, NY)

Isaiah 40:1-26

The destruction of Tisha B'av and the three haftarot of punishment which preceded it have left us distraught, grieving, and yearning for redemption. To comfort and lift our distraught spirits, and to encourage us in repentance as the Days of Awe approach, for the next seven weeks we recite successive haftarot of comfort and consolation (Aramaic: שבע דנחמתא). Their texts from the final third of Isaiah, chapters 40-66, do not relate to the weekly Torah readings. With increasing intensity each week, Isaiah calls out to God's exiled people, saying that He still yearns for a relationship with them and wants them to come close to Him so that He can redeem them from exile.

Haftarah Breakdown and Important Themes

Verses 1-2: Having severely punished and forgiven exiled Judah's sins, God now comforts their afflictions.

Isaiah 40:1	ישעיהו מ:א
"Comfort, comfort, My people," says your God.	נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמֶר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Verses 3-5: God is on his way to Jerusalem, and all mankind will see His revealed Glory.

Isaiah 40:3	ישעיהו מ:ג
A voice calls, "In the desert, clear the way of the Lord, straighten out in the wilderness, a highway for our God."	קוֹל קוֹרֵא בַּמִּדְבָּר פָּנוּ דֶרֶךְ ה' יִשְׂרוּ בְּעֵרְבָה מִסְלָה לְאֱלֹהֵינוּ:

Verses 6-8: Mortal man and his promises are fleeting, but God's promise of redemption is everlasting.

Isaiah 40:8	ישעיהו מ:ח
The grass shall dry out, the blossom shall wilt, but the word of our God shall last forever.	יִבֶשׂ חֲצִיר נִבְלָ צִיץ וּדְבַר־אֱלֹהֵינוּ יָקוּם לְעוֹלָם:

Verses 9-11: Leading His people back from exile, God will reward and redeem them as He promised.

Isaiah 40:10	ישעיהו מ:י
Behold the Lord God shall come with a strong [hand], and His arm rules for Him; behold His reward is with Him, and His recompense is before Him.	הִנֵּה אֲדֹנָי ה' בְּחֹזֶק יְבוֹא וּזְרָעוֹ מִשְׁלָה לּוֹ הִנֵּה שִׂכְרוֹ אִתּוֹ וּפְעֻלָּתוֹ לְפָנָיו:

Haftarah Breakdown (cont.)

So far, Isaiah has discussed God's revelation to the Jewish people and the world as a great redeemer. He now widens the lens to capture a transcendent aspect of God's greatness: the Creator of all.

Verses 12-14: God alone, in His wisdom, created the world.

Isaiah 40:12	ישעיהו מ:י"ב
Who measured water with his gait, and measured the heavens with his span, and included the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed mountains with a scale and hills with a balance.	מִי־מִדַּד בְּשַׁעְלוֹ מַיִם וְשָׁמַיִם בְּזָרֶת תִּכְּנֶן וְכָל בְּשֵׁלֶשׁ עֶפְרָ הָאָרֶץ וְשָׁקַל בְּפֹלֵס הָרִים וּגְבָעוֹת בְּמֵאזְנַיִם:

Verses 15-19: Even the most powerful of nations and their idols are as nothing before Him.

Isaiah 40:17	ישעיהו מ:י"ז
All the nations are as naught before Him; less than naught and vanity are they considered by Him.	כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם כְּאֵין נִגְדָו מֵאֶפֶס וְתֵהוּ נִחְשָׁבוּ־לוֹ:

Verses 20-26: Nothing in the world compares to God, and He is above everything.

Isaiah 40:22	ישעיהו מ:כ"ב
He Who dwells above the circle of the earth - its inhabitants like grasshoppers; He who stretches out the heaven like a curtain, and He spread them out like a tent to dwell in.	הַיֹּשֵׁב עַל־חֻג הָאָרֶץ וַיִּשְׁבֶּיהָ כַּחֲגָבִים הַנוֹטָה כְּדֹק שָׁמַיִם וַיִּמְתַּחֵם כְּאֹהֶל לְשֹׁבֵת:

Other Connections

Rav Chaim of Volozhin describes **the nature of the future revelation of God** predicted in verse 5.

Nefesh HaChayim, Gate III 11	נפש החיים, שער ג:י"א
And regarding the future, it is written (Isaiah 40:5): "and all flesh together shall see that the mouth of the Lord spoke." Namely, that [humanity's] perception will be refined to the point that [they will] be able to perceive and also see with physical eyes the matter of how [God's] blessed utterance permeates everything in the universe, similar to how perception of this kind already occurred at the time of the giving of the Torah. For it is written (Exodus 20:18): "and the entire nation sees the sounds". And this is also stated [by Chazal] at the end of [chapter] Eilu Ovrin : "The World to Come is not like this world. In this world, [God's name] is written as yud-hey yet pronounced as a-do-nai, but in the World to Come, it's written as yud-hey and pronounced as yud-hey (Pesachim 50a). Understand this."	ולע"ל כתיב (ישעיהו מ:ה) וראו כל בשר יחדו כי פי ה' דבר. היינו שיזדכך השגתנו עד שנזכה להשיג ולראות גם בעין הבשר ענין התפשטות דבורו יתב' בכל דבר בעולם. כמו שכבר היתה ההשגה מעין זה בעת מתן תורה דכתיב וכל העם רואים את הקולות. והוא ג"כ בכלל מאמרם ז"ל ס"פ אלו עוברין לא כהעה"ז העה"ב. העה"ז נכתב בי"ה ונקרא בא"ד אבל העה"ב נכתב בי"ה ונקרא בי"ה והבן.