

Haftarah Helper: Vaetchanan

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The Haftarot recited during the final quarter of the Jewish year, between the 17th of Tammuz and Sukkot, do not generally relate to the weekly Torah reading. Instead, they describe the workings of the covenant between God, His people, His Land, and humanity. The three “Haftarot of Punishment” describe the people breaking the covenant, and prophets who unsuccessfully sought to return them to it. Focusing on the First Temple’s destruction and the people’s resulting exile from the Land, Tisha B’av’s Haftarah laments the destruction caused by the broken covenant. Taken from the final third of the book of Isaiah, the next seven weeks’ “Haftarot of Comfort” (Aramaic: שבע דנחמתא) are recited until Rosh Hashanah. They powerfully describe the exiles’ eventual redemptive return to God’s covenant and Land. The Haftarot from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur are explicit, uplifting calls for the people to repent and repair the covenant so God can redeem them. The Haftarot of Sukkot describe how redemption will impact all humanity.

Isaiah 40:1-26

In this Haftarah, Isaiah describes two aspects of God’s relationship to His exiled people. First, he highlights God’s role as a great redeemer. With a variety of metaphors, Isaiah highlights God’s voice and His promises about returning His people to Jerusalem. Isaiah then focuses on God’s transcendent greatness as Creator of all. God “proudly” proclaims His ultimate wisdom and might over even the mightiest human and natural powers. Since He shaped them and created them, He has the power to destroy or remake them. This power, Isaiah argues, enables God to carry out His redemptive promises as described in Haftarah’s first section.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 1-2: Having severely punished and forgiven exiled Judah’s sins, God comforts them in their affliction.

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

Verses 3-5: God is on his way to Jerusalem, eliminating all natural obstacles to His return. All mankind will see His revealed Glory.

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| Isaiah 40:3 | ישעיהו מ:ג |
| A voice cries, “In the wilderness, prepare the Lord’s path. Straighten a highway in the desert for our God.” | קוֹל קוֹרֵא בַּמִּדְבָּר פְּנֵי יְהוָה ה' יִשְׂרוּ בְעֵרְבֹהּ מִסְלָה לְאֱלֹהֵינוּ: |

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

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| Isaiah 40:8 | ישעיהו מ:ח |
| The grass withers [and] the flower fades [but] our God’s word shall stand forever. | יָבֵשׁ תִּצְיֵר גִּבְלֵי צִיץ וְדִבְרֵי־אֱלֹהֵינוּ יָקוּיִם לְעוֹלָם: |

Verses 9-11: The prophet tells the people not to fear. As a mighty warrior, God will fulfill His promise to mightily redeem and reward them. Like a shepherd, God will ensure each individual's return from exile.

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| Isaiah 40:10 | ישעיהו מ:י |
| Behold! The Lord God will come with might, and His arm shall rule for Him. Behold! His reward is with Him, and his hire before Him. | הִנֵּה אֵלֹהֵי ה' בְּחֹזֶק יָבֹוא וְזָרְעוּ מִשְׁלָה לְוֵה הַגָּה שְׂכָרוֹ אִתּוֹ וּפְעֻלָּתוֹ לִפְנֵינוּ: |

Verses 12-14: God's transcendent power and knowledge allowed Him alone to construct the world.

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| Isaiah 40:12 | ישעיהו מ:י"ב |
| Who measured the waters in his hand's hollow, meted out heaven with the span, included earth's dust in a measure, weighed mountains in a scale, or hills in a balance? | מִי־מָדַד בְּשַׁעֲלוֹ מַיִם וְשָׂמַיִם בְּזֶרֶת תַּפְּחֵן וְכָל בְּשִׁלְשׁ עֶפְרָה הָאָרֶץ וְשָׂמַל בְּפֶלֶס הָרִים וּגְבָעוֹת בְּמֵאזְנָיִם: |

Verses 15-20: Therefore, even powerful nations and their offerings and idols cannot compare to God.

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| Isaiah 40:17 | ישעיהו מ:י"ז |
| All nations are as nothing before Him. They are considered to Him as less than nothing and vanity. | כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם כְּאֵין נִגְדוּ מֵאִפְסֵס וְתָהוּ נִחְשָׁבוּ־לוֹ: |

Verses 21-26: As Creator, God sits above the world; all humanity, even its most powerful, are like insects in His eyes. No person is remotely similar to God.

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| Isaiah 40:22 | ישעיהו מ:כ"ב |
| [God is the one who] dwells above earth's circle, its inhabitants like grasshoppers. The One who spreads the heaven like a curtain, stretching them out like a tent for dwelling. | הֵי־שֵׁב עַל־חֹוֶג הָאָרֶץ וַיִּשְׁבֶּיהָ כַּחֲגָבִים הַנּוֹטָה כְּדָק שָׂמַיִם וַיִּמְתְּתֵם כְּאֹהֶל לְשֹׁבֵת: |

Connections

Based upon Isa. 40:5, R. Chaim of Volozhin asserts that in messianic times people will see, literally, **God's word permeating physical reality**.

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| Nefesh HaChayim, Gate 3:11 | נפש החיים, שער ג:י"א |
| Regarding the future, it is written (Isaiah 40:5), "All flesh together shall see that the Lord's mouth spoke." Namely, that our [humanity's] perception will be refined to the point that we will be privileged to perceive and also see with physical eyes how His blessed word permeates everything in the universe. This is similar to the type of perception that already occurred at the time of the giving of the Torah, as it is written (Exodus 20:18), "The entire nation sees the sounds." | ולע"ל כתיב (ישעיהו מ:ה) וראו כל בשר יחדו כי פי ה' דבר. היינו שיוזדכך 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 הקולת. |

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