

Haftarot Unrolled: Bo

Reason to Fear

The Haftarah of Bo has several different allusions to the Parsha: the defeat of Egypt, a reference to locusts, the repetition of the word "bo", the first use of the term "Tzva-ot". However, the ending, where Yirmiyahu speaks to the Jewish People about their upcoming exile, seems to be irrelevant, both to the Haftarah itself, and to the Parsha. Why were these two verses included, and what do they add to our understanding of the Parsha?

Let us look at those verses in the Haftarah:

(כז) וְאַתָּה אֶל תִּירָא עֲבָדֵי יַעֲקֹב וְאַל תַּחַת יִשְׂרָאֵל ...
(כח) אַתָּה אֶל תִּירָא עֲבָדֵי יַעֲקֹב נְאֻם ה' כִּי אִתְּךָ אֲנִי

- 27) But you, My servant Yaakov, do not fear! Do not be frightened, Israel!
28) You, My servant Yaakov, do not fear, says Hashem, for I am with you;.....

In general, when G-d tells you not to be afraid, that is a sign that you probably have several excellent reasons to be very afraid. The Temple is about to be destroyed, Yerushalaim burned and its people exiled, so there is no shortage of reasons to fear. Which of them, specifically, is G-d addressing? How is knowing that He is with us meant to calm those fears?

In order to understand this, we need to look at a very similar set of verses, back in Breishit. Right before Yaakov took his entire family down to Egypt, G-d said this to him:

(ג) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי הֵאֱלֹהִים אֲבִיךָ אֶל תִּירָא מִרְדֹּת מִצְרָיִם כִּי לְגוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשִׁימָךְ שָׁם:
(ד) אֲנֹכִי אֲרִיד עִמָּךְ מִצְרָיִם וְאֲנֹכִי אֶעֱלֶךָ גַם עֲלֵה...

- 3) He said, I am the G-d of your father; **do not fear** to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there.
4) **I will go down with you** to Egypt, and I will definitely bring you up....
(Breishit 46)

As the Children of Israel were on their way to Egypt, with no plans for return, at the beginning of the very first Exile of the Jewish People, G-d tells Yaakov: "Do not be afraid". What is he afraid of? He knows that if he stays, his family will starve to death, and in Egypt, they will be cared for. So it is not their physical survival he is worried about. Rather, from the fact that G-d reassures him by saying: "I will make you a great nation there", we can infer that his fear was that the mission G-d entrusted to Avraham would fail. They would go to Egypt, they would die there, their children may or may not remember that their destiny lies elsewhere. The Children of Israel would last a

generation or two, and then disappear among the other tribes in Egypt, or within Egyptian culture itself. There would be no Jewish People. There would be no Torah, no Land of Israel, no unique relationship with G-d.

So G-d tells him: this, you don't have to worry about. I will take care of it. I am with you. I am with you as you go down to Egypt, and I will be with you as you go up from Egypt.

Similarly, the Haftarah speaks to the Jewish People, shortly before their impending exile to Babylonia. Here too G-d says: "Do not be afraid, Yaakov! Do not be afraid of losing your identity as Yaakov, as the Jewish People, do not be afraid that your destiny is over, that your relationship with Me is gone. I am with you. "

But the Haftarah is not for Parshat VaYigash in Breishit, it is for Parshat Bo. How does it connect back to Bo?

In Parshat Bo, we read about the Jewish People finally leaving Egypt. It is here that G-d's words to Yaakov, "I will also take you up", come true. Just as G-d told Yaakov, his family has become a "great nation." They leave Egypt not as a collection of individuals, but rather as "the Children of Israel", G-d's own force in this world:

מֵא (מֵא) וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה וָאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה
וַיְהִי בַעֲצָם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יֵצְאוּ כָּל צְבָאוֹת ה' מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

At the end of 430 years, on that very day,
the armies of Hashem left the land of Egypt (Shemot 12)

Parshat Bo provides closure not only to Yaakov's fears and G-d's promise to be with him, but also to a promise that G-d made to Avraham, 430 years earlier. At the covenant called "Brit Bein HaBetarim" (Covenant between the Parts), G-d told Avraham that an exile is a necessary part of the plan, including the pain and suffering that it will cause his children. Then, too, G-d needed to calm Avraham's fears:

א) אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה דְבַר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם בְּמַחְזָה לֵאמֹר אֵל תִּירָא אַבְרָם...

1) After these things, Hashem spoke to Avram in a vision saying, "Do not fear, Avram"... (Breishit 15)

Avraham was afraid not only of the pain and suffering of slavery; he was also afraid that the exile will cause the Jewish People to lose their identity and their unique relationship with G-d. G-d's side of the covenant was the promise that He would make sure that the exile would have the effect of turning them into His nation.

When G-d sealed this covenant, which was done, according to local custom, by walking through a path formed by objects cut in half, the Torah describes it thus:

וַיְהִי הַשָּׁמֶשׁ בָּאָה וְעֹלָטָה הָיָה וְהָיָה תַנּוּר עָשָׂן וְלִפִּיד אֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר עָבַר בֵּין הַגְּזָרִים הָאֵלֶּה:

17) And it was that as the sun came; and it was dusk; there was a **pillar of smoke and a flame of fire** that passed between those pieces.

G-d walked through the path represented by a pillar of fire. That was when the decree for the exile in Egypt was sealed, and the process began.

In Parshat Bo, the exile that began at Brit Bein HaBetarim ended:

וְהָיָה הַלֵּךְ לַפְּנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּעַמּוּד עָנָן לְנַחֲתָם הַדְרֹךְ וְלַיְלָה בְּעַמּוּד אֵשׁ לְהַאִיר לָהֶם לְלַכֵּת יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה:

21) And Hashem walked before them by day as a pillar of cloud to guide the way; and at night, as a **pillar of fire** to give them light; to walk day and night.
(Shemot 13)

Four hundred and thirty years later¹, on that day, the Children of Israel walked out of Egypt, and G-d walked with them.

In the Haftarah, as the Jewish People leave for a new exile, the first one since Egypt, they are just as afraid for the future of their children as Avraham and Yaakov had been. G-d uses the same words to reassure them:

(כה) אַתָּה אֵל תִּירָא עַבְדִּי יַעֲקֹב נֹאֵם ה' כִּי אִתָּךְ אֲנִי
You, My servant Yaakov, do not fear, says Hashem, for I am with you

The Haftarah tells us that just as G-d was with us as the exile to Egypt began, and just as He was with us when it ended, so He will be with us in all the exiles. He will not reject us, and He will not let us reject Him. Whether or not we see the pillar of fire leading us, He is there with us.

May we see the end of all our exiles, speedily and in our day.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל

¹ According to Rashi, 430 years has at its starting point the Brit Bein HaBetarim with Avraham; he calculates the time from Yaakov entering Egypt as 210 years. It is not the only opinion among the commentaries, to say the least. See the Ramban and Ibn Ezra on this verse.