

Haftarot Unrolled: VaEtchanan/ Nachamu

The First Step

On the Shabbat after Tisha B'Av we read the first of the seven Haftarot of consolation, known as the Sheva de'Nechemta. This Haftarah begins with G-d commanding the prophets to give hope and comfort to the Jewish People, "Nachamu, Nachamu ami." As a result, this Shabbat is known as "Shabbat Nachamu."

But how should the prophet go about consoling the Jewish People for the seemingly unending series of tragedies that is Jewish history? What can he say that will give us comfort and rather than causing additional pain? If he describes the glorious future that awaits us, will that help? Or would it be so far-fetched, so distant from our experience of anguish and hopelessness, that we would dismiss it as unrealistic? The nations that stood in the way of us returning to our land - the Babylonians, the Persians, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Caliphates, the Ottomans, the British - each of these was an empire of epic proportions. How is it possible for a tiny nation with no political or military resources to defy them?

Thus, the first thing the prophet needs to do in order to give us hope is to prove that the path to Redemption is a possibility, and that G-d is capable of affecting history and bending it to His will.

מי מִדָּד בְּשַׁעֲלוֹ מִיָּם וְשָׁמַיִם בְּזֶרֶת תִּכְוֶן וְכָל בְּשֹׁלֵשׁ עֶפְרָה הָאָרֶץ וְשָׁקַל בְּפָלֶס הָרִים וּגְבְעוֹת
בְּמֵאזְנָיִם: הֵן גּוֹיִם כְּמֶר מִדְּלִי וְכִשְׁחֶק מֵאֲזֵנִים נִחְשְׁבוּ הֵן אֵיִם כְּדָק פְּטוֹל:

Who measured the sea with His handfuls, and affixed the sky with a ruler? And placed in a measure all the dust of the earth, weighed mountains on a scale and hills on a balance? ...

The nations are a drop in a bucket, reckoned like dust on a balance, so, the continents are like a dust mote. (Yeshayahu 40: 12, 15)

The Haftarah reminds us that G-d created the universe and all that is in it. When measured on the scale of the Universe, nations and empires are infinitesimal. What power do they have relative to the Creator?

Likewise, in the Parsha, Parshat VaEtchanan, which is always read on Shabbat Nachamu, we read how Moshe Rabbeinu reminds the Jewish People of their personal experience of G-d's power over history:

או הִנֵּסָה אֱלֹהִים לְבוֹא לְקַחַת לוֹ גּוֹי מִקְרֹב גּוֹי
בְּמִסַּת בְּאֵתָת וּבְמוֹפְתִים וּבְמִלְחָמָה וּבִיד חֲזָקָה וּבְזִרְעוֹ נְטוּיָה
וּבְמוֹרָאִים גְּדֹלִים כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לָכֶם ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בְּמִצְרַיִם לְעֵינֶיךָ:
אֵתָה הִרְאֵתָ לְדַעַת כִּי ה' הוּא הָאֱ-לֹהִים-לְהַיָּ אֵין עוֹד מִלְבָּדוֹ:

Has G-d attempted to come and take Himself a nation from another nation, with miracles, signs, and wonders, with war and a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great awe, like everything that He did for you, Hashem, your G-d, in Egypt, before your eyes?

You were shown so you would know that it is Hashem who is G-d, there is nothing besides Him. (Devarim 4: 34-5)

Having experienced the Exodus, the Jewish People know for a fact that G-d can depose any tyrant and bring ruin the most invincible of empires. No so-called "superpower" can stand in the way of G-d's plans for our destiny.

The Haftarah goes on to point out that the Jewish People do not actually need any proof of this fact, as it is something that they already know:

הָלוֹא תִדְעוּ הָלוֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ הָלוֹא הִגַּד מֵרֵאשִׁית לְכֶם
הָלוֹא הִבִּינְתֶם מוֹסְדוֹת הָאָרֶץ :
וְאֵל מִי תִדְמִיּוּנִי וְאִשְׁוֶה יֹאמַר קְדוֹשׁ :

Do you not know, have you not heard? Has it not been foretold to you?
Do you not understand the foundations of the earth?
To whom can you liken Me, and find Me equal? says the Holy One.
(Yeshayahu 40:21,25)

According to the Haftarah, the Jewish People are expected to know that G-d is not only the creator of the world, but also the only power in it. We have been shown that He can affect not only the forces of nature, but also the forces of history. If He wants the Jewish People to come back to the Land of Israel, nothing will stand in His way.

Still, in the midst of pain and tragedy, it is hard to remember that this is so, and we need the prophet to remind us.

By renewing our buried memory of G-d's intervention in our history, the Haftarah begins the process of renewing our faith in our future. This is the first step in the seven-step process of comforting the Jewish People and giving us a vision of our destiny as a feasible, attainable goal.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l
לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל