

Haftarat Lekh Lekha לך לך

Torah: Genesis 12:1–17:27

Haftarah: Isaiah 40:27–41:16

God Transforms Exhaustion to Strength

General Overview

Isaiah chapter 40 begins the third major section of Isaiah's writing. The first sections, chapters 1–35, are mainly prophetic messages, mostly of rebuke, to Israel, Judah, and the nations who mistreated them. Yet there are some breaks in the storm clouds where the prophet looks far ahead to the Messiah and His kingdom, a revelation designed to encourage the faithful remnant of both Israel and Judah.

The second section, chapters 36–39 provide a brief historical interlude where Isaiah mainly writes about King Hezekiah and the invasion of the Assyrians under King Sennacherib while Hezekiah was reigning.

Finally, chapters 40-66, the third main division of Isaiah, are designed to encourage and comfort the remnant of Israel and Judah, especially after they suffer through the Babylonian exile. Here Isaiah is prophesying about events far ahead of his own day to both warn the unfaithful and to encourage the remnant.

Our haftarah comes near the beginning of this third and final section of the Book of Isaiah. After a passage where idolatry is thoroughly challenged and rebuked, Isaiah endeavours to encourage Israel that they do not need to trust in idols, but that God will give them strength. Chapter 41 opens by a summons to the nations to come before the divine court and provide evidence that the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, is not the most powerful in the entire universe.

Finally, the haftarah concludes with the first of the many "Servant" passages found in this unique section of Isaiah. These frequent and special "Servant" passages are what prompt many commentators to label this section of Isaiah, "The Book of the Servant" or "The Song of the Servant."

They constitute chapters 40–53. Here in these chapters, Israel is called the servant of God, and is described by God as a people who are uniquely supported and called by the Holy One.

Historical Background

Please consult the previous two haftarot for notes on the Historical Background. The information provided there also applies to this portion as well. However, there is one significant note we do want to add. In verses 41:2 ff, the Lord summons the nations to Him and asks them "Who inspired the one from the east?" This is the first hint in Isaiah of the coming of King Cyrus of the Medo-Persians. In our previous studies we noted that he was, in fact, mentioned by name in chapter 45 and interestingly enough, referred to as "the messiah."

All throughout chapters 40–66, Isaiah is primarily looking into his own future and predicting things yet to come. Here he foresees the Babylonian captivity

and beyond, especially to the time when God would raise up King Cyrus to deliver Judah from that captivity.

Connection to the Parasha

Parashat Lekh Lekha, Genesis 12:1–17:27, is one of the most significant Torah portions. It is the story of God's calling of Abraham and the covenant He makes with the Patriarch. It is in this parasha that we learn of the beginnings of the chosen family, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that Abraham comes to be called by God as "My servant," (in Genesis 26:24). Likewise, in this haftarah, we see Israel, is called God's chosen servant, and referred to as the seed of Abraham. Moreover, just as God called Abraham out of idolatry, so too does this haftarah call Israel out of its idolatry to be God's faithful servant.

Exposition

We are now ready to dive into our study of this haftarah, Isaiah 40:27–41:16. As we do, we will follow this outline of the passage:

- I. Strength to Israel
- II. Summons to the Nations
- III. Support to the Servant

In this excerpt from Haftarat Lekh Lekha, we will focus on the section I, Strength to Israel.

I. Strength to Israel (Isaiah 40:27–31)

The opening verses of our haftarah are some of the most well known in the entire Scripture! Isaiah begins chapter 40 by speaking words of compassion to the remnant people of Israel and Judah, particularly those who would find themselves witnessing the burning of the Temple and being carried off into captivity to Babylon. Isaiah foresees their return from captivity and the arrival of Messiah in their midst to lead them in safety. Hence, verses 40:1–11 provide a comforting message of deliverance for the suffering descendants of Jacob.

Then, in 40:12–26, Isaiah presents a case for the Sovereignty of God, especially over the "dumb idols" of both the nations who would harass Israel and also those living within her gates. The intention seems to be to rebuke and humiliate all who would even think of turning to man's inventions rather than trusting in the Supreme God of gods. Idolatry was one of the factors that contributed to Israel's downfall. Therefore, that subject will come up many times throughout the prophets.

A. Israel Questions God

This all leads us to our opening section of the haftarah, Isaiah 40:27–31. Herein, the prophet addresses the hurting and discouraged people of Israel and Judah. The Assyrians had long since carried many of their number away as this fierce kingdom was carrying out some of God's righteous judgments. In addition, many of the intended readers of this passage were living in

Babylon, with the horrid memory of their sacred Temple and beloved city of Jerusalem being consumed by their enemies' flames and swords.

They had suffered through years of watching the spiritual downfall of their nation, helplessly standing by as many of their countrymen had forsaken the Covenant, and the God of that Covenant, and wasted their lives away in idolatry and the sordid practices that came with it. By the time they would receive Isaiah's words, they were tired. They were exhausted from all of this trauma both they and their nation had experienced. "Could it be true?" they may have asked. "Can the gods of the Babylonians be greater than the God of Israel?" they may have wondered, "After all, the Babylonians won the war. They solidly defeated us. Their gods must be stronger," they may have been thinking. "How can we ever recover from all of this? How can we even have the strength to believe that God is the one who can rescue us from these idol worshippers, the Babylonians?"

In short, the people must have concluded that since their plight was so miserable, perhaps not only was their God weak, but He may not even care what had happened to them. Accordingly, Isaiah 40:27 records their questioning: "Why then do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel; 'My plight is hidden from the Lord, and my right is ignored by my God'?"

At the same time the prophet is bewildered that they should even think such a thing about God. In the preceding verses, using words of superb beauty, the prophet reinforces his argument that the whole universe, heaven and earth, and the history of mighty men and nations bear testimony to the infinite power, wisdom, and grandeur of God "seeing that the Lord is so omnipotent, so wise, and yet so gracious, how can Jacob/Israel say, or even think, that God does not care about their plight, or about the vindication of their right?"¹

B. Wait Upon the Lord

According to Isaiah, there is only one answer to the fatigue — both physical and spiritual — of this nation. He states it clearly in 40:30–31:

Though youth may faint and grow weary, and choice young men may stumble and fall; yet those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.

Those in a society who are normally expected to be the strongest are mentioned in this passage. They are teenage boys and young men. The Hebrew language uses the words *na'arim*, נערים for teenagers and *b'churim* בחורים for young men. This last word shares a common root with the word for "choose," בחר. Thus, *b'churim* are the choicest of young men, the cream of the crop.

The text says that even when these, the strongest in Israel, would become exhausted, if they would "wait upon the Lord" they would be strengthened by Him. The word translated "wait for" (from קוה) can have the sense of "wait eagerly for:"² It is the root which forms the noun for "hope," (*tikveh*, תקוה). Keil and Delitzsch suggest that this is a synonym for believing in the Lord, "for the Old Testament applies to faith a number of synonyms denoting trust, hope, and longing."³

Thus, if these exhausted choice young men would put their trust and hope in the Lord, God would change their exhaustion into strength. Many English

texts use the phrase “renew their strength.” That might be appropriate. However, the word in question (*yachlif*, יחליפו, from the root חלף) actually stresses a change taking place. In other words, their old human ability was not to pull themselves along. That proved fruitless! It led to unbelief, and to idolatry. Instead, the Holy One is promising that if even the choicest men in Israel would come to their end and put their hope in God, He would completely change them and give them His strength (*koach*, כוח).

Teach me, LORD, the way of your decrees,
that I may follow it to the end.
Give me understanding, so that I may keep your Torah
and obey it with all my heart.
Direct me in the path of your words,
for there I find delight.
Turn my heart toward your statutes
and not toward selfish gain.
Turn my eyes away from worthless things;
preserve my life according to your word.

Psalm 119: 33-37

1 Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 2, 335–336.

2 Brown, Driver, and Briggs (BDB), *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (“BDB”), 875.

3 C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Isaiah*, 156.