

PROBING the PROPHETS

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The three weeks of mourning have passed, the nine days of more intense grief are over, and, as a result, our haftarot change the theme from condemnation and warning to the seven haftarot “d’nechemta”, of consolation. And, indeed, we need the solace and comfort that the words of the nevi'im offer us. Surely, therefore, if we, two-thousand years after the tragedy, thirst for some message of hope, certainly the generation of the churban, the people who suffered through the destruction of the Batei Mikdash and the painful exiles, yearned for a consoling message of hope even more than we. How fitting, then, are the opening words of this fortieth perek in Sefer Yeshayahu, “Nachamu, nachamu, ami”, words that Hashem issues to the prophets, urging them to comfort His people after the tragedy. Additionally, these words (and, of course, the perek itself) open up a new section of Sefer Yeshayahu which, until now, included his prophecies of warning. In the first part of his book, the navi told the Judean population that the punishment just meted out to their brothers in the North would befall them as well, unless they changed their ways. It was not a section filled

with warming messages of comfort but of cautionary counsel to change their ways.

Curiously, however, after opening His message with these words of hope and comfort, the prophet apparently shifts focus and opens an oft-repeated theme of the prophetic era, that of comparing G-d with Man, comparing the Immortal to the mortal, the Infinite to the finite and the Limitless to the limited. This theme is often used to warn the nation against idolatry, impressing the people with the foolishness of worshipping man-made gods and copying the pagan worship. Given that, we would be correct in wondering why Yeshayahu would find this message to be a comforting or consoling one. It certainly is an important message to leave with the people.... but why now?? Why at this terribly difficult time?? And why is it THE primary message of this reading, continuing for fifteen of the twenty-six verses in the haftarah?

The answer can be found some psukim later. The promise of redemption was not simply a guarantee that Israel would return to her land after the exile but that the return would be a miraculous one. The navi describes the great wonders that would accompany the geula and charges the people to publicly proclaim the arrival of the redeemer.

“Hashem Elokim b’chazak yavo”, G-d will arrive with great strength and His power will rule. In fact, the final chapters of Sefer Yeshayahu are replete with the descriptions of the great wonders that all the world will see when the redemption arrives.

Now, would we not imagine that a people just exiled from her land, a nation that witnessed the Bet Mikdash of her G-d destroyed, that saw her cities in ruin and thousands of her children slaughtered - that such a generation would almost scoff at the prophet’s prediction of great miracles and wonders from a G-d that had just been ‘defeated” by another power??

Yeshayahu imagined that too.

And so, he fills his prophetic message with imagery of what Hashem does that is unequalled in the universe. The comparison of G-d’s power to those of false entities was not used here as an argument against idolatry - although it could be. Rather it is used as comforting words to convince suffering people that the promises of wonders and miracles are NOT unbelievable but are, given the marvels He performs every day and the wonders He is capable of, quite believable.

And this was one of the goals that Yeshayahu hoped to accomplish for future generations: to see that they

not simply believe in the geula but they would confidently trust that the seemingly impossible and unrealistic are, for G-d, possible and realistic.

Only a nation that carries with them in their collective memories the words of her prophets can march to their deaths singing “Ani Ma’amin”, and watch from heaven as their beliefs are proven true, seeing their children and grandchildren return to live in, and build up, the land in which Yeshayahu delivered the divine message.

Probing the Prophets, weekly insights into the Haftara, is written by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler, author of Bringing the Prophets to Life (Gefen Publ.)