

Down and Out in Babylonia

PARSHA INSIGHTS - HAFTORA FOR VA'ESCHANAN (5758)

ARE THE SEVEN HAFTOROS OF COMFORT IN ANY ORDER?

Beginning with the *Shabbos* [Sabbath] after *Tisha B'av* [historically, a day of Jewish mourning], we read the seven *haftoros* [additional reading of Scripture] of comfort. They are all taken from the book of *Yeshaya* [Isaiah]. After the devastating *churban* [destruction] of the *Bais Hamikdosh* [Temple], the prophets attempt to console the Jewish people.

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin states that we sometimes imagine that there is no specific order to these seven *haftoros*. This is absolutely false. They are arranged in “a wondrous order”, declares the Lutzker Rav. It is based on the *Midrash Yalkut Shimoni* in *Yeshaya*, section 443.

There, *Chazal* [our Sages] tell us that Hashem dispatches the prophets to give words of comfort to *Bnai Yisroel* [the Children of Israel] because of the *churban*. The Jewish nation, however, refuses to accept these calming messages. What is the reason? It is as if the *Bnai Yisroel* say, “You are the same prophets who predicted doom and destruction for us, and now you bring tidings of sympathy. You now promise that Hashem will send relief. Which statements are we to believe - the original, disastrous ones, or these new ones?” As a result, Hashem Himself says that He will go and personally comfort the Jewish people. With this theme in mind, let us investigate these seven *haftoros*. We will discover that their order conforms to this *Midrash*.

In today's haftora (beginning with Yeshaya 40:1), the Master of the Universe commands the prophets to console *Bnai Yisroel*. “Comfort, comfort my nation...” Notice that the word “*nachamu*” [consolation] is the plural command form, a directive from Hashem, urging the *nevi'im* [prophets] to bring news of consolation. These agents of G-d are told to “speak unto the heart of Yerushalayim” to appease her. However, as the above mentioned *Yalkut Shimoni* explains, *Bnai Yisroel* are too distraught to hear any of this. They refuse to hearken to these words.

Next week's haftora (beginning with Yeshaya 49:14) expresses this idea. “And Tziyon said, ‘Hashem has forsaken me, G-d has forgotten me.’” We see that *Bnai Yisroel* are depicted as shunning the soothing messages of the *nevi'im*.

The third of the seven haftoros (beginning with Yeshaya 54:11) is Hashem's reaction to *Bnai Yisroel's* refusal. “Afflicted, storm-tossed, UNCONSOLED ONE...behold, I shall lay your floor stones on pearls, and make your foundations of sapphires.” What is the meaning of “unconsoled one” (“*lo nuchama*”)? You have accepted no reassurance from the prophets, as explained above. The *Yalkut Shimoni* relates that even the avos [forefathers] - Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaacov, and even Moshe *Rabainu* [Moses our teacher], find no success in their attempts to pacify the Jewish people in exile. Only *Hakodosh Baruch Hu* [the Holy One, Blessed is He] will effectively console us.

Thus, the fourth haftora (beginning with Yeshaya 51:12) proves that Hashem Himself goes to comfort *Bnai Yisroel*. “It is I, I am the One Who comforts you...” Rav Sorotzkin points out that these first four (of the seven) *haftoros* serve as a preface to the last three. In other words, **the last three are the actual haftoros of consolation; just that they were preceded by the first four. The first four were introductory. They consisted of the prophets' attempt to comfort the Jews, our refusal to receive the reassuring words, and Hashem's proclamation that HE will have to be the one to appease us.**

Based on this, Rav Sorotzkin suggests that these last three, the genuine *haftoros* of comfort, correspond to the three *haftoros* of the Three Weeks. Recall that we just went through the three weeks between the seventeenth of *Tammuz* and *Tisha B'av*. On those *Shabbosim* [Sabbaths], three *haftoros* predicting catastrophe for *Bnai Yisroel* were read. To offset the mournful tone of those three weeks, these last three of the seven *haftoros* of comfort are read. Again, the first four of the seven of comfort were simply leading into these last three.

In summary, let us examine this in chronological order:

- 1) Between the two fast days, the seventeenth of *Tammuz* and *Tisha B'av*, three *haftoros* of tragedy are read.
- 2) For the next seven weeks, seven *haftoros* of consolation are read.
- 3) When we break down these seven, we find that the first four introduce the last three.

The splendid words of the prophet *Yeshaya* (61:10), in the last of these seven, are the response of *Bnai Yisroel* to Hashem's soothing messages. "I will surely rejoice with Hashem, my soul shall celebrate with my G-d. For He has dressed me in garments of salvation, in a robe of righteousness He has cloaked me, like a bridegroom who wears priestly glory, like a bride who adorns herself in her jewelry." May we experience this salvation in our days.

By Rabbi Moshe Heigh

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