

TLATA DEPURANUTA & SHIVA DENECHEMTA

Three Haftarat of Punishment,
Seven Haftarat of Consolation

The Consolation Period Begins

We launch the series of comforting haftarot with the chapter that opens the second part of the book of Yeshayahu.

All seven remaining haftarot come from this section of that sefer.

Let's briefly note the famous "issue" with this book regarding chronology.

Modern scholars will speak about "Second Isaiah" but this concept is found in our tradition as early as Ibn Ezra.

From Fishbane, *Haftarot*

Isaiah 40:1–26 constitutes the opening section of what Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra called “the second part of the book” (in his comment on Isa. 40:1). It marks a major shift in time and focus from the concluding prophecies of the first part (Isaiah 36–39), which deal with episodes near the end of King Hezekiah’s reign—especially the miraculous salvation of Jerusalem from the Assyrians in 701 B.C.E. (Isaiah 36) and a visit to Jerusalem by emissaries of the Babylonian king Merodach-baladan (Isaiah 39). By contrast, Isaiah 40 opens with prophecies of consolation addressed to the Judeans exiled to Babylon in the deportations of 597 and 586 B.C.E. and to the destroyed city of Jerusalem. The proclamation states that the people’s sins have been forgiven and the time of punishment is complete. The prophecies of Isaiah 40 thus postdate 538 B.C.E., after Cyrus the Mede conquered Babylon and issued a proclamation permitting the restoration of subject peoples under his dominion. For this Cyrus is even designated the Lord’s “anointed” (*meshiho*) agent, strengthened and supported in his divine task (Isa. 45:1–2).

(continued)

According to R. Joseph ibn Kaspi, it is “right and proper” that the prophet announces restoration, having just spoken (in chap. 39) of the destruction.³ Ibn Ezra made a similar observation but regarded the prophecies as referring to the exile of his own day. According to R. Moses ibn Chiquatilla, however, Isaiah 40–66 refers to the restoration from the Babylonian exile at the beginning of the Second Temple period.⁴ This view is now generally accepted by modern historical scholarship.

Ibn Gikatilla:
Late 11th century CE

Programmatic
approach to dating
prophecies

Numerous citations are found, especially in Abraham ibn Ezra, from Gikatilla's commentaries on Isaiah, the Minor Prophets, and the Psalms. Gikatilla is the first Jewish exegete who gave a purely historical explanation of the prophetic chapters of Isaiah and of the utterances of the other prophets. He refers the prophecies in the first part of Isaiah to the time of King Hezekiah and to the Assyrian period, and those in the second part to the time of the Second Temple. According to him, Joel iii. 1 (A. V. ii, 28) does not refer to the Messianic time, but to the numerous prophets' disciples contemporary with Elijah and Elisha. He also assumes the

The Scholarly Version (Childs, *Isaiah*)

and Sweeney. In the English-speaking world the monograph of Williamson has stimulated interest with his hypothesis that Second Isaiah was the actual editor shaping literarily the traditions of First Isaiah into book form. Clearly the redactional approaches have varied considerably and no real consensus has yet emerged (cf. some of my reservations in “Retrospective Reading,” 363ff.).

Eichhorn (1778–83). Three major arguments emerged for assigning chapters 40–66 to a sixth-century author.

- a. The historical setting of chapters 40ff. appears to reflect an exilic period after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 and the ensuing deportation of the Judaeans captives.

- b. There are striking differences in language, style, and concepts between the first and second parts of the book, which can be most easily explained by positing two different authors.
- c. If chapters 40ff. were spoken by an eighth-century prophet to the needs of an exiled people some one hundred fifty years in the future, it would be a situation without parallel in the rest of the Old Testament.

However, the specific argument that seemed to carry the most weight, especially in the English-speaking world (cf. Davidson, 81ff.; Smith, 9; Skinner, xixff.), turns on the logic of chapters 41–48. The coming of Cyrus is not presented as a future prediction, but rather as proof that the prediction of him has been fulfilled. On the basis of his former prophecies concerning Cyrus, which have been realized and can readily be confirmed by all, the prophet then makes a future prediction in 44:24ff. and 45:1ff. The logic of the prophetic argument demands that the audience of the prophet’s words stands at a point in the sixth century when the former prediction is viewed as part of history.

Jewish Study Bible summary of the second part:

Chs 40–48: The first prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah. On the authorship of chs 40–66, see intro. The first of the three sections within chs 40–66 was written by the anonymous exilic prophet in Babylonia, shortly before or immediately after the fall of Babylonia to the Persians led by Cyrus, but before Cyrus issued his decree allowing the Judean exiles to return to Zion (see Ezra 6.3–5; 2 Chron. 36.22–23). Chs 40–48 consist of several long speeches. In each, Deutero-Isaiah marshals evidence to show the depressed exiles that (1) God is genuinely powerful, and the Babylonian conquest does not indicate that God was defeated by some other alleged god or some other force; (2) God con-

tinues to love the nation Israel, and the Babylonian conquest does not indicate that God has abandoned Israel; (3) God is reliable, and what God promises God does; and therefore (4) the exiles can be sure that they will soon return to their land. The prophet frequently seems to be responding to specific complaints, doubts, and expressions of hopelessness among the exiles. A few of these statements made by Deutero-Isaiah's listeners are cited explicitly (e.g., 40.27; 49.14; 50.1; 50.2). Each speech appearing in these chs moves through several types of reasoning to support these assertions; then the speech ends, and another one begins. It is often difficult (and, ultimately, unimportant) to delineate the precise beginning and end of each speech, since each one presents the same argument using the same types of evidence. This first section of Deutero-Isaiah's prophecies focuses on several themes that are absent in chs 49–66: They emphasize the uniqueness of the LORD, who is the only God; they identify the Persian king Cyrus as the individual through whom God brings salvation to Israel; and they compare "former things" that God had done with "new things" that

God is about to do. Since the major message of this prophet is reconciliation and comfort, eight sections from these chapters are read as the haftarah, or prophetic readings, in the summer, on the Sabbaths following Tish'ah be'av, which commemorates the destruction of the Temple.

Prologue before Prophecy

The first 11 verses are an introductory section.

40.1–11: An introduction to the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah. Vv. 1–11 introduce the main themes and motifs of the following chs: God comforts the nation, assures them that their term of punishment in the Babylonian exile has ended, and promises that they will soon return to Zion. This introductory passage echoes elements of the prophetic initiation scene (see n. to ch 6): God announces that God has a message that the prophet should convey to the nation Israel (vv. 1–5); the prophet objects and is reassured (vv. 6–9). This section also introduces a special feature of Deutero-Isaiah's work: This prophet frequently borrows and revises material from older biblical texts.

PART 1. WORDS OF COMFORT AND HOPE (Isaiah 40:1–11)

a. Isaiah 40:1–5 The haftarah opens with God's word of comfort and forgiveness, addressed the people and the city of Jerusalem (vv. 1–2). A further word announces the advent of the Lord and His manifestation before "all flesh" (vv. 3–5).

b. Isaiah 40:6–8 Another proclamation announces that "all flesh" is like grass that withers, but the word of God stands firm. This pivotal prophecy gives assurance that the announcement of restoration can be trusted.

201 HAFTARAH FOR VA-ETHANNAN (SHABBAT NAHAMU)

c. Isaiah 40:9–11 A final call to a divine herald to "announce to the cities of Judah" that the Lord is coming with recompense for His people and Land.

PART 2. THE INCOMPARABILITY OF GOD (Isaiah 40:12–26)

The majesty and wisdom of God are portrayed. Nothing can be compared to Him in the heavens above and the earth below—neither the nations and their rulers, nor the idols made by men (vv. 15–20, 23–24).

Let's read the prologue

40 Comfort, oh comfort My people,
Says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
And declare to her
That her term of service is over,
That her iniquity is expiated;
For she has received at the hand of the LORD
Double for all her sins.
3 A voice rings out:
"Clear in the desert
A road for the LORD!
Level in the wilderness
A highway for our God!
4 Let every valley be raised,
Every hill and mount made low.
Let the rugged ground become level
And the ridges become a plain.
5 The Presence of the LORD shall appear,
And all flesh, as one, shall behold—
For the LORD Himself has spoken."
6 A voice rings out: "Proclaim!"
Another asks, "What shall I proclaim?"
"All flesh is grass,
All its goodness like flowers of the field:

7 Grass withers, flowers fade
When the breath of the LORD blows on them.
Indeed, man is but grass:
8 Grass withers, flowers fade—
But the word of our God is always fulfilled!"
9 Ascend a lofty mountain,
O herald of joy to Zion;
Raise your voice with power,
O herald of joy to Jerusalem—
Raise it, have no fear;
Announce to the cities of Judah:
Behold your God!
10 Behold, the Lord God comes in might,
And His arm wins triumph for Him;
See, His reward* is with Him,
His recompense before Him.
11 Like a shepherd He pastures His flock:
He gathers the lambs in His arms
And carries them in His bosom;
Gently He drives the mother sheep.

But what's the context? Let's sit with Childs for a bit:

The more difficult and truly the decisive exegetical question turns on establishing the context for the prologue's interpretation. One's decision fundamentally affects the understanding of both the passage and the whole of Second Isaiah. The problem, of course, emerges because of the lack of any superscription, which usually introduces a new prophetic collection. To suggest that it has been lost in transmission is a completely speculative thought and highly misleading. It is also clear from the attempts of the LXX and the Targum to supply an alleged addressee ("priests"; "prophets") that the problem was recognized.

One characteristic way of establishing a context, which increasingly emerged as the majority opinion once the authorship of chapter 40 was assigned to an anonymous prophet of the sixth century, was to see the prologue as a call narrative of a new prophet. However, apart from the difficulty of introducing a first person pronoun into v. 6 according to the LXX's reading, the unit lacks most of the elements of a traditional call and shares a host of anomalies, such as the unidentified voices of vv. 3 and 6.

A much more compelling reconstruction of a context was proposed by Cross in 1953. Cross argued that vv. 1–8 reflect a genre that he described as "divine directives to angelic heralds," with its setting in the divine council. Parallels for this genre occur in 1 Kings 22:19ff., Isa. 6:1ff., Job 1:6ff., and in extrabiblical literature. However, Cross then returned to the earlier theory of the prophet's call in vv. 6–8 and spoke of a mixed genre with elements from a call narrative and a divine council.

Finally, credit for a new, decisive interpretation of the prologue goes to Seitz's brilliant essay of 1990, which builds on Cross's analysis but moves the discussion in a very different direction. Seitz sharply rejects the call narrative context along with all the accompanying biographical and psychological features that have been widely assumed (cf. Westermann). Rather, he sees the exegetical key to lie in an intertextual relation between chapters 40 and 6 of Isaiah. Both chapters share the language of the heavenly court. In a conscious dependency on chapter 6, chapter 40 does not offer a new independent call narrative, but rather provides a reapplication of Isaiah's call. The commission of Isaiah of Jerusalem has been fulfilled by the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 587. The prophetic message of judgment has been summarized in 40:6b–7 by an intertextual reference to 28:2b–4: "the fading flower of his glorious beauty." However,

the point of the prologue is the announcement of a divine decision that now reverses the commission of judgment assigned to Isaiah: "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and declare to her that her term of service is over" (v. 2). The prologue signals that the old age is passing away and a new day is dawning. Historic Isaiah is now a distant figure of the past, but extending into the future is the word of God which endures forever. Seitz writes: "God speaks again from the divine council as he had done formerly in Israel's day. . . . [T]he word of God goes forth directly commissioning the heralds of good tidings" (245).

Childs almost agrees, but not quite

the relation to the new things

For Seitz, Isaiah of Jerusalem is a voice of the past who has been assigned to an old and distant era, and his words are only summarized as “the last gasp of the old” in vv. 6b–7. The message of the new is now given by various anonymous voices. However, I will argue that Isaiah of Jerusalem is understood as the proclaimer of both the “old things” of judgment and the “new things” of salvation. The message of the prologue is that, although the prophetic judgment has been fulfilled, Isaiah’s word of future salvation is now about to be accom-

plished in the new things. The continuity between chapters 1–39 and 40ff. does not lie in the historical *persona* of Isaiah—in this Seitz is right—but rather in the word of God, faithfully proclaimed by Isaiah, which extends into the future and fulfills itself in the new things of which Isaiah had also spoken. The strongest evidence for the continuity of chapter 40 with First Isaiah is the ongoing description of the “new” in terms of an intertextual reference to the earlier corpus of his prophecy.

Fishbane:

the initial word of “comfort” (*nahamu*) is spoken by God for the people, but it is formulated in the plural—a fact that has led some interpreters to assume that the divine word is addressed to angelic emissaries. Equally puzzling is the second speech, which begins “A voice rings out” (v. 3) and goes on to announce the advent of God. This voice presumably belongs to one of the divine heralds, which the prophet hears and reports. Thereafter, another “voice rings out: ‘Proclaim!’” and another asks, “What shall I proclaim?” (v. 6). Here, again, one may presume that the prophet overhears the voices of the divine messengers. The word of such an emissary, called a “herald of joy” to Zion and Jerusalem (v. 9), is proclaimed for a final time in the concluding unit of the first part.

Thus the chapter arguably contains a series of divine charges to heavenly messengers—instructing them to bring God’s word of comfort to Zion. The prophet overhears these proclamations and announces them to the people. Emphasis is also placed on the reliability of the divine word—a matter that reinforces confidence in the prophecies of consolation. Further reason to trust is given in the next part of the haftarah, which portrays the majesty and might of God.

So let's now dig into the text (Fishbane below)

3. *A voice rings out.* This anonymous voice appears again as that of a divine messenger (cf. Comment to v. 1). Rashi proposed that it was the Holy Spirit; Ibn Ezra suggested that it was that of the messengers. According to Masoretic tradition, the clause that follows is the content of the voice; that is, “A voice rings out: ‘Clear in the desert a road for the LORD!’” This fits with the poetic structure of the next phrase, “Level in the wilderness a highway for our God!”

Another ancient tradition, first attested in the so-called *Serekh Ha-Yahad* of the Qumran Scrolls (1QS 8:14), interpreted the phrase as saying that “A voice rings out from the desert.”⁵ On this basis, the faithful retreated to the desert to prepare for the advent of God. A similar interpretation

6. *Another asks* Hebrew *ve-'amar*. Apparently one messenger speaks to another, and the prophet overhears them. The reading of the Septuagint suggests an underlying *va-'omar*, “And I said (asked).” This reading is confirmed by the large Isaiah scroll from Qumran, which has *va-'omrah*. Such a formulation suggests that the prophet is addressed by one of the divine messengers.

All Flesh is grass, but God's Word is Steadfast

6 A voice rings out: "Proclaim!"
 ^a Another asks, ^a "What shall I proclaim?"
 "All flesh is grass,
 All its goodness like flowers of the field:

a-a 1Q15^a and Septuagint read "And I asked."

and reassurance. A heavenly voice gives an order to issue a proclamation; another voice (probably that of the prophet, especially if the alternate version in translators' note *a-a* is correct) asks what should be proclaimed, and the first voice answers this question. According to the quotation marks added by the NJPS translation, the prophet's question is brief, and the answer takes up most of v. 6 and all of vv. 7–8. Thus the prophet must proclaim that humans are weak (and therefore the Babylonian conquerors will disappear), but God's strength is enduring. It is also possible, however, that the prophet's question continues all the way through the end of v. 7. In that case, these vv. are an objection to acting as conduit for the divine word: As a mere human, the prophet fears that he will be overcome by the powerful and destructive *breath of the LORD* (lit. "wind" or "Spirit" of the LORD, which is a

technical term denoting the God-given capability to serve as a prophet). V. 8 contains the divine response: Even though the task of conveying God's words is frightening, it must be completed.

Heralding God

ity.” **9–11:** God’s arrival in Jerusalem. Messengers are told to announce to Jerusalem that the LORD will soon arrive. Normally, a *herald* would inform a city that an army was arriving, but here God arrives as a gentle *shepherd*, not to destroy but to protect.

[9–11] In an earlier section the question was raised of whether vv. 9–11 form a separate oracle because of the change in genre, or whether they constitute an integral part of the prologue. The ensuing exegesis of vv. 1–8 would seem to confirm the latter interpretation. Zion and Jerusalem are now personified as the evangelists of the good tidings. They are appointed to proclaim the news to the cities of Judah.

9. *Ascend . . . O herald of joy to Zion* The phrase is difficult. The verb “ascend” is feminine (*‘alt lakh*), as is the phrase “herald of joy” (*mevasseret*). The other voices are masculine. Medieval commentators resolved the difficulty either by asserting (without justification) that the verb *mevasseret* is not a true feminine form (Ibn Ezra) or by assuming that the call was to the “prophecy” (*nevu’ah*, a feminine noun) to ascend and herald joy to Zion (di Trani; Abravanel). Alternatively, the speaking voice goes back to verse 6, and the call is to Zion itself to announce the good news to the cities of Judah (Kimhi).

Incomparable God

- 12 Who measured the waters with the hollow of His
hand,
And gauged the skies with a span,
And meted earth's dust with a measure,^b
And weighed the mountains with a scale
And the hills with a balance?
- 13 Who has plumbed the mind of the LORD,
What man could tell Him His plan?
- 14 Whom did He consult, and who taught Him,
Guided Him in the way of right?
Who guided Him in knowledge
And showed Him the path of wisdom?
- 15 The nations are but a drop in a bucket,
Reckoned as dust on a balance;
The very coastlands He lifts like motes.
- 16 Lebanon is not fuel enough,
Nor its beasts enough for sacrifice.
- 17 All nations are as naught in His sight;
He accounts them as less than nothing.
- 18 To whom, then, can you liken God,
What form compare to Him?

- 19 The idol? A woodworker shaped it,
And a smith overlaid it with gold,
^aForging links of silver.^a
- 20 As a gift, he chooses the mulberry^b—
A wood that does not rot—
Then seeks a skillful woodworker
To make a firm idol,
That will not topple.
- 21 Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Have you not been told
From the very first?
Have you not discerned
^aHow the earth was founded?^a
- 22 It is He who is enthroned above the vault of the
earth,
So that its inhabitants seem as grasshoppers;
Who spread out the skies like gauze,
Stretched them out like a tent to dwell in.
- 23 He brings potentates to naught,
Makes rulers of the earth as nothing.
- 24 Hardly are they planted,
Hardly are they sown,
Hardly has their stem
Taken root in earth,
When He blows upon them and they dry up,
And the storm bears them off like straw.
- 25 To whom, then, can you liken Me,
To whom can I be compared?
—says the Holy One.
- 26 Lift high your eyes and see:
Who created these?
He who sends out their host by count,
Who calls them each by name:
Because of His great might and vast power,
Not one fails to appear.

Jewish Study Bible and Childs

40.12–31: The incomparable God.

In this speech, Deutero-Isaiah focuses on God's unique power. Because the LORD is the only true God and the creator of the world, the LORD will be able to defeat the Babylonians and restore Zion. Some Judeans probably believed that Babylonia's gods defeated their God, but the prophet insists that in fact no other being in the universe could do so. **12–17:** Divine grandeur. No entity in heaven or earth compares to God, and therefore none can prevent God from acting. **18–20:** A brief argument against idolatry: Certainly the God who created the world is mightier than the gods worshipped by most humans. Those gods, after all, are created, not creators.

Verses 15–17 then proceed to draw the implications from the disputation in respect to the nations. They can lay no claim to a share in God's power or wisdom. They are judged as nothing and emptiness in comparison to God. At the very historical moment when exiled Israel is feeling the tremendous threat from the great powers of the world, such as Babylon, and remembering the humiliating annihilation of the Jewish state, the prophet boldly pronounces the rulers of the world to be as meaningless before God as "a drop from a bucket"!

Fishbane

This haftarah boldly proclaims “comfort” (*nahamu*) for Zion and its inhabitants. Following the recitation of the Book of Lamentations on Tisha b’Av, it redresses the repeated elegy for Zion: “there is none to comfort [*menahem*] her” (Lam. 1:2, 9; cf. w. 16, 21). For now there shall be no more complaint that “Zion’s roads [*darkhei Tziyon*] are in mourning” (Lam. 1:4) and that the exiles “could only walk feebly [*be-lo’ koah*]; lit., “without strength”] before the pursuer” (v. 6). This lament is counterpointed by the proclamation, “Clear in the desert a road [*derekh*] for the LORD!” (Isa. 40:3); while another announces that God “gives strength [*koah*] to the weary” and “they who trust in the LORD shall renew their strength [*koah*]” (vv. 29, 31). A new era has dawned. The hope of Zion, that her “iniquity . . . is expiated” and God “will exile you no longer” (Lam. 4:22), is now realized in full measure: the people’s “iniquity is expiated” and her “term of service is over” (Isa. 40:2).

A note on 40:27-31, which fit well but get left out

Almost all traditions do not read the remainder of the chapter. There's one Cairo Genizah fragment that indicates we do read to the end, however:

וריאציות של המנהג הנפוץ²

- מנהג פרס – בוכרה³, כמה קהילות באיטליה⁴ – ההפטרה מסתיימת בישעיהו מ':ט"ז.
- מנהג חלק מהתימנים⁵ – מדלגים ומוסיפים ישעיהו מ"א:י"ז
- קטע אחד בגניזה⁶, חלק מהיתמנים היום⁷ – מדלגים ומוסיפים ישעיהו מ"א:י"ז
- מהדורת הרב קאפח של הרמב"ם משנה תורה סדר תפלות ז'⁸ – ההפטרה מסתיימת בישעיהו מ':י"א
- קטע גניזה⁹, חומש רומניוטי אחד בכתב יד¹⁰ – ההפטרה מסתיימת בישעיהו מ':כ"ב
- קטע גניזה¹¹ – ההפטרה מסתיימת בישעיהו מ':ל"א
- מנהג ארץ ישראל הקדום לשבת נחמו¹² – ההפטרה מסתיימת בישעיהו מ':ח'

So let's look at 27-31 (Childs translation)

- 27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and complain, O Israel:
“My way is hidden from the LORD
and my right is ignored by my God?”
- 28 Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary.
His understanding cannot be fathomed.
- 29 He gives strength to the weary,
and increases the power of the weak.
- 30 Youths may grow faint and weary,
and young men stumble and fall,
- 31 but they who trust in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles,
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not faint.

tory. **27-31:** Deutero-Isaiah arrives at the point of the arguments marshalled in vv. 12-26. The Judean exiles have lamented that God no longer pays attention to them (v. 27). But God is still able to listen to them, for God never grows tired (vv. 28-31).

his message. In sum, the passage begins with a rhetorical style which then provides the response to a complaint; however, it is given voice when the accusations have already been rendered irrational and groundless in the light of God's actual creative and redemptive presence. Israel's unbelief has not been disregarded, but absorbed within the reality of the everlasting God.

The structure of 40:12-31 is as follows:

- vv. 12-17 No one can gauge God's work
 - 12 not in creation
 - 13-14 not in counsel
 - 15-17 not among the nations
- 18-26 No one can compare with God
 - 18-24 no one compares: proof given
 - 25-26 no one compares: proof given
- 27 Israel's complaint
- 28-31 Hymnic climax: God gives strength to the faint

their land. The prophet frequently seems to be responding to specific complaints, doubts, and expressions of hopelessness among the exiles. A few of these statements made by Deutero-Isaiah's listeners are cited explicitly (e.g., 40:27; 49:14; 50:1; 50:2). Each speech appearing in these chs moves through several types of reasoning to support these assertions; then