FIRST HAFTARAH OF CONSOLATION
HAFTARAH FOR VA-ETHANANN
ISAIAH 40:1–26

(Recite on the first Shabbat after the 9th of Av, called Shabbat Nahamu—named after the first word of this haftarah. This occasion coincides with the reading of Va-ethannan.)

The haftarah opens with prophecies of consolation. Apparently these were addressed both to the Judeans who had been exiled to Babylon (in the deportations of 597 and 587–586 B.C.E.) and to the destroyed city of Jerusalem itself. Because we are told that the people’s sins have been forgiven and that their punishment is complete, these words most likely were spoken after 538 B.C.E. (That was when Cyrus the Mede conquered Babylon and issued a proclamation permitting the restoration of subject peoples, including the return of Judeans to Jerusalem.)

The haftarah does not speak the language of political freedom or release but announces God’s heavenly word of comfort and restoration. Indeed, the prophet stresses the fulfillment of God’s word and His supremacy over all nations and kings. The prophecy reorients the people to Zion and announces the advent of God’s Presence—to confirm and guide the renewal of His people and their homeland.

The haftarah is divided into two series: proclamations of consolation to the nation and to Zion (vv. 1–11), and teachings that emphasize God’s unfathomable majesty and transcendence (vv. 12–26). At the outset, a series of divine charges is addressed 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, thus giving them comfort as well.

To reinforce confidence in the prophetic proclamation, the next part of the haftarah depicts God as awesome in might. The prophet addresses the people with a series of rhetorical questions. By this means, he confronts the nation with the surpassing power and wisdom of God. Two series of rhetorical questions—verses 12–14 and 21–24—provide a theological frame for the entire section. In the first series, God’s transcendence is juxtaposed to the comparative nothingness of nature and the delusion of idol makers. Then a question is asked: “To whom, then, can you liken God?” (v. 18). In the second series, God’s might is juxtaposed to the limited knowledge of human beings. Once again the question resounds, “To whom, then, can you liken Me?” (v. 25).

THE SEVEN HAFTAROT
OF CONSOLATION

This passage is the first of the Seven Haftarot of Consolation (shiv-ah d’nehemata) that announce Israel’s redemption. All of these selections are taken from Isaiah 40–66. They are recited on the seven Sabbaths after Tish-ah b’Av, a fast day that commemorates the destruction of Zion and the exile of Judah.

The Seven Haftarot of Consolation follow the Three Haftarot of Admonition (puranuta) that were recited on the three Sabbaths before Tish-ah b’Av. As the synagogue calendar progresses, these 10 haftarah readings are followed by one chosen especially for the Shabbat that precedes Yom Kippur. Thus we have a cycle of special haftarah for this period, each unrelated to the parashah that is read on Shabbat.
Comfort, oh comfort My people,
Says your God.
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.

A voice rings out:
“Clear in the desert
A road for the LORD!
Level in the wilderness
A highway for our God!
Let every valley be raised,
Every hill and mount made low.
Let the rugged ground become level
And the ridges become a plain.

The Presence of the LORD shall appear,
And all flesh, as one, shall behold—
For the LORD Himself has spoken.”

A voice rings out: “Proclaim!”
Another asks, “What shall I proclaim?”
“All flesh is grass,

Isaiah 40:1. Comfort, oh comfort Hebrew: nahamu nahamu. The double verb form is a hallmark of Isaiah (see 51:9,17, 52:11). It serves to express rhetorical intensification (Radak). In Ibn Ezra’s opinion, it “indicates that the comfort will occur swiftly or repeatedly.” God’s word of comfort is apparently directed to his heavenly messengers, who are charged with addressing Jerusalem and its people (see v. 3).

2. The opening proclamation is intensified by three explanations of the comfort to come; each is introduced by the word ki (that, for). A theology of divine punishment and forgiveness lies behind this passage. Unilaterally God determines the period of punishment (“service”) involved. Nothing is said of human repentance.

3. A voice rings out The anonymous voice of a divine messenger is heard (see v. 1). Rashi proposed that it was the Holy Spirit; Ibn Ezra suggested that it was the voice of the messengers.

6. Another asks Hebrew: va'ammar. Apparently one messenger speaks to another, and the prophet overhears them. The Septuagint’s rendering, however, suggests an underlying va-omar. “And I said (asked),” as if a divine messenger has addressed the prophet. Similarly, the large Isaiah scroll from Qumran (the “Dead Sea Scrolls”) reads va-ammar.

All flesh is grass This image underscores human mortality and transience compared to the eternal, supernatural word of God. The image recurs in Psalms (90:4–6, 103:15–17).
All its goodness like flowers of the field:
Grass withers, flowers fade
When the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Indeed, man is but grass:
Grass withers, flowers fade—
But the word of our God is always fulfilled!

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!
Behold, the Lord God comes in might,
And His arm wins triumph for Him;
See, His reward is with Him,
His recompense before Him.

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.

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,
And weighed the mountains with a scale
And the hills with a balance?

Who has plumbed the mind of the Lord,
What man could tell Him His plan?
Whom did He consult, and who taught Him,

12. Repeated questioning confronts us with the unfathomable majesty of God, whose cosmological supremacy is emphasized. This puts into perspective the work of human hands and mocks the mortal desire to create divine forms from the world God created.

14. Whom did He consult? This may be an indirect critique of Gen. 1:26, in which God apparently speaks to the heavenly court before creating man (“Let us make man”). Similarly, the emphatic point “To whom, then, can you liken [t’damyun] God?” (Isa. 40:18, cf. v. 25) may be
Guided Him in the way of right?
Who guided Him in knowledge
And showed Him the path of wisdom?

The nations are but a drop in a bucket,
Reckoned as dust on a balance;
The very coastlands He lifts like motes.

Lebanon is not fuel enough,
Nor its beasts enough for sacrifice.

All nations are as naught in His sight;
He accounts them as less than nothing.

To whom, then, can you liken God,
What form compare to Him?
The idol? A woodworker shaped it,
And a smith overlaid it with gold,
Forging links of silver.

As a gift, he chooses the mulberry—
A wood that does not rot—
Then seeks a skillful woodworker
To make a firm idol,
That will not topple.

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Have you not been told
From the very first?
Have you not discerned
How the earth was founded?
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.

directed against the notion in Genesis that man
was created in the “likeness” (d’muteinu) of God
and the angels.

the way of right Hebrew: orah mishpat. This
apparently refers to the nature of the universe and
its laws (Radak).
He brings potentates to naught,
Makes rulers of the earth as nothing.
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.

To whom, then, can you liken Me,
To whom can I be compared?
—says the Holy One.
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.

25. the Holy One God is designated by the term kadosh (holy), which occurs frequently as K’dosh Yisra-el, “The Holy One of Israel” (see 41:14, 43:14, 54:5) and expresses the prophet’s theology of God’s utter sanctity and transcendence. The epithet provides a link to the first half of the book, in which God is repeatedly called K’dosh Yisra-el (see 5:19, 10:20, 12:6). The theological emphasis echoes Isaiah’s numinous Temple vision, in which he heard the angelic host singing kadosh three times before God (6:3).