

# נחמו נחמו עמי: Finding Comfort in Exile

Dr. Michelle J. Levine

Associate Professor of Bible, Stern College for Women

“Alas! She sits solitary, the city that was great with people. She has become like a widow, she that was great among the nations. . . She cries bitterly in the night, her tears are on her cheeks. There is none to comfort her (איך לה מנחם) . . .” (Eichah, 1:1-2). The piercing lament of Yirmiyahu that cries out from Megillat Eichah does not leave a dry eye among Bnei Yisrael who languish in exile. How will Israel find comfort when she feels so abandoned? How will she be consoled when she is surrounded by the taunts of her enemies? With great intuition, Hazal have discerned that Hashem provided the nation of Israel with solace and relief, even before the advent of the catastrophic events that would befall them. “You find that concerning all of the harsh prophecies which Yirmiyahu prophesied about Israel, Yeshayahu preceded them and provided healing for them. . . Yirmiyahu said, ‘They heard how I have sighed; there is no one to comfort me’ (Eichah, 1:21). Yeshayahu said, ‘Comfort, comfort My people (נחמו נחמו עמי)’ [Isa. 40:1].”<sup>57</sup> Chapter 40 of Sefer Yeshayahu, which we read as the first of seven selections of haftarot from the prophecies of Yeshayahu, beginning with the Shabbat after Tisha be-Av,<sup>58</sup> marks the commencement of a journey of healing. After remembering the destruction of the two Batei Mikdash, every Jew attempts to fortify himself with the prophetic words of comfort and hope, finding the courage to survive in exile while awaiting the final redemption.<sup>59</sup>

At the outset of his prophetic message of consolation, Yeshayahu captivates his audience by evoking the memory of the unprecedented events of *Yeziat Mitzrayim* and *Matan Torah*, which established the eternal covenant between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael. Summoning imageries and verbal cues that conjure up the glorious past, Yeshayahu impresses upon his audience that Hashem has not abandoned Israel, but He intends to redeem them and restore their status among the nations of the world. A survey of chapter 40 testifies to the prophet’s intent. The

---

<sup>57</sup> *Midrash Eichah Rabbati*, 1:23.

<sup>58</sup> See Maimonides, *Hilkhot Tefillah*, 13:19.

<sup>59</sup> While the entire chapter 40 will be discussed in the ensuing analysis, the haftarah reading itself ends after verse 26.

charge to clear a path in the wilderness and desert, to flatten the mountains and hills (וכל הר) (וגבעה ישפלו) recall the geography of Matan Torah (Exod. 19).<sup>60</sup> “Voices (קול)” that announce important revelations (40:3, 6) remind one of the voice of Hashem that Bnei Yisrael heard at the giving of the Torah (Deut. 4:12, 33).<sup>61</sup> The manifest appearance of Hashem’s glory (ונגלה כבוד יקוק וראו כל בשר יהדו) (40:5) at the time of redemption evokes the momentous occasion of Matan Torah (Exod. 24:16-17).<sup>62</sup> The image of a storm that destroys the rulers of nations like straw (40:23-24); God’s arm of strength that ensures triumph (40:10); the spirit (or: wind) of God (רוח) that blows and dries up what once flourished (40:7); while Hashem serves as the shepherd of His nation (40:11), lifting them up with renewed strength to soar like eagles (40:31), recalls the drying up of the waters with a strong wind so that Am Yisrael could escape the Egyptians (Exod. 14:21); the drowning of the Egyptians in the sea like straw, through Hashem’s powerful spirit (Exod. 15:7-8); Moshe, the divinely ordained shepherd (Exod. 3:1)<sup>63</sup> leading his people out of Egypt, with Hashem carrying them as if on the wings of eagles (Exod. 19:4); and Hashem leading His flock through the wilderness (Ps. 78:52).<sup>64</sup>

Yeshayahu sharpens his message of comfort by evoking another dimension of the Exodus memory. Analyzing the symbolism of Hashem’s choice to initiate His encounter with Moshe with the apparition of a burning bush, Rashi, based on a midrash, observes that Hashem wanted to send a poignant message to His suffering nation: “I am with you in your distress” (עמו אנכי בצרה).<sup>65</sup> When Am Yisrael descends to the depths of exile, Hashem, כביכול, feels their humiliation and pain and suffers with them. As Hashem declares to Moshe at the scene of the burning bush, “I know their sufferings (ידעתי את מכאביו)” [Exod. 3:7]. As Rashi explains, “I

<sup>60</sup> The reference to a herald to ascend a high mountain to announce to the cities of Judah that Hashem is returning to Zion (40:9) also alludes to מעמד הר סיני. Compare the discussion of Yosef Rut and Nahum Sharvit, פרקים בנבואת (Tel Aviv: Or Am Pub., 1987), pp. 19-21, who observe that this topography is reminiscent of that of the desert of Sinai, as noted in Deut. 8:15 and Jer. 2:6.

<sup>61</sup> The reference to a “voice” (קול) is also reminiscent of Hashem’s voice that answered Moshe prior to the giving of the Torah (בקול יעננו והאלקים ידבר משה) in Exod. 19:19; cf. as well the sounds of the shofar and of thunder (Exod. 19:16, 19), described with this same term.

<sup>62</sup> Hashem’s “כבוד” is also noted in relation to the מן in Exod. 16:7, and it is manifest in the Mishkan, as noted in Exod. 40:34-35.

<sup>63</sup> Compare the description in relation to Moshe’s role as the divinely ordained shepherd of Israel in Isa. 63:11.

<sup>64</sup> For this parallel from Psalms, cf. Amos Chacham, ספר ישעיהו: פרקים לו - טו (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1984), p. 414, n. 15. Even the mention of a “tent” describing how the heavens are spread out like a tent to dwell in (40:22), might stir within the reader the image of the אהל מועד, as juxtaposed to other images from the Book of Exodus. Furthermore, in an unsettling reminiscence, one of the only other times that the image of grasshoppers (חגבים) appears as descriptive of the inhabitants of the earth, aside from Isa. 40:22, is in the spy narrative, depicting the spies’ perception in relation to the giants whom they encountered in Canaan (Num. 13:33). This imagery might parallel the doubters and pessimists regarding Hashem’s concern for Israel’s plight, as expressed by Yeshayahu in 40:27. The Exodus motif is invoked in numerous places throughout Yeshayahu’s prophecies; see, for example, Isa. 10:24, 26; 11:16; 42:15; 42:14-21; 43:1-3. For additional discussion of the Exodus paradigm in Yeshayahu’s prophecies of consolation, cf. B. W. Anderson, “Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage*, eds. B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson (New York: Harper and Bros., 1962), pp. 181-85.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Rashi, Exod. 3:2, citing *Midrash Tanhuma, Shemot* 14, with the application of the text from Ps. 91:15.

[Hashem] have turned My attention to understand and acknowledge their sufferings, and I have not hidden My eyes and I have not closed my ears from their cries.”<sup>66</sup> To impress upon his nation the surety of their redemption, Yeshayahu describes a scene at the beginning of his prophecy of consolation in which the way is first prepared for Hashem to return to Jerusalem, to reclaim His place of abode (40:3-5). Only then can He bring back His people and restore them to the cities of Judah (Isa. 40:9-11). While Yeshayahu speaks often of preparing “the way for the redeemed (דרך גאולים) to travel” (Isa. 51:10), and of removing the obstacles from the path of his nation (דרך עמי) [Isa. 57:14; compare Isa. 62:10], in this context, he focuses on smoothing the path for “the way of Hashem (פנו דרך ה’)” and straightening “the road for our God (מסלה) (לאלקינו) [40:3].”<sup>67</sup>

The imagery describing Hashem’s return is especially poignant in light of the distressing portrayal of the abandonment of Hashem’s glory from the confines of the city of Jerusalem, in preparation for exile, as described by Yehezkel (10:18-22, 11:22-23).<sup>68</sup> The cosmic redemption must transpire before the earthly redemption can materialize. While Yeshayahu had originally envisioned the glory of Hashem filling the entire world (מלא כל הארץ כבודו) [Isa. 6:3], Yehezkel perceived Hashem’s glory as blessed, but “from His place” (ברוך כבודו ה’ ממקומו) [Ezek. 3:12], during the period of exile. In the time of redemption, Hashem’s presence will be manifest once again, but this time, it will have universal proportions. “ונגלה כבוד ה’ וראו כל בשר יחדו”: God’s glory will be revealed, and all flesh, together, will see (40:5). The wide ranging impact of Bnei Yisrael’s redemption will be acknowledged by the world over.<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps, however, the description of Hashem’s return to Jerusalem at the beginning of Yeshayahu’s prophecy alludes to another predominant motif that permeates his message of consolation in chapter 40: the Creation narrative ורוח תהום על פני תהום (Gen. 1:2). When analyzing the meaning of “תהו ובהו,” Rashbam and Ibn Ezra clarify that the initial condition of the world was uninhabitable. The earth was filled with obstacles to a prosperous existence, permeated by a thick darkness and covered with deep

<sup>66</sup> Rashi, Exod. 3:7, who also compares this acknowledgment to the statement in Exod. 2:25, “God knew.” Cf. Rashi on Exod. 2:25.

<sup>67</sup> For this reading, compare Amos Chacham, *ישעיהו ספר* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1984), Vol. 2, p. 410, on Isa. 40:3; cf. Radak, Isa. 40:3, who notes the emphasis to clear “the way for our God,” signifies that “He is the leader of this nation that is emerging from exile.” This reading differs from that of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, Isa. 40:3, who equate the “way of Hashem” with the path for the redeemed. It is instructive, however, to see a sequential progression here or at least two different perspectives of the redemption process, with Hashem leading the way and reinstating His glory and presence in Jerusalem as a means of preparing for the ingathering of the exiles and restoring them to their cities.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. John D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66: Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 25* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), p. 80, on Isa. 40:3, and John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* (London/New York: T and T Clark International, 2005), p. 18.

<sup>69</sup> Compare Isaiah 2 regarding the universal features of the final redemption; cf. Isa. 66:19, where Yeshayahu emphasizes that during the time of redemption, all nations will acknowledge Hashem’s “glory (כבוד).” Compare Zephaniah 3:9, in which the prophet stipulates how the entire world will speak a clear language, declaring the oneness of Hashem in the time of the final *geulah*.

waters (Gen. 1:2).<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Yeshayahu declares, “For thus said Hashem, Creator of the heavens; He is the God who fashioned the earth and its Maker. He alone established it. He did not create it to remain as תהו; He formed it to inhabit it (לשבת יצרה)” [Isa. 45:18]. In the song of *Ha’azinu*, Moshe associates the geography of תהו with a place of wilderness (ארץ מדבר) [Deut. 32:10]. The wilderness is symbolic of a less than ideal existence, signifying the domain of exile.<sup>71</sup> With poetic double entendre, Yeshayahu envisions a voice that calls out to remove the obstacles that make the world a place of תהו, uninhabitable for Hashem’s presence. It commands that a path be cleared so that Hashem may once again “reside” in His permanent domain, in Jerusalem, where His glory is revealed openly to everyone.<sup>72</sup>

Evoking the cornerstone motif of Creation, Yeshayahu expands upon the significance of this event as the indisputable proof that redemption is imminent. The relationship between creation and the world’s historical destiny may be clarified through Rashi’s answer to the question of the midrashic sage, R. Isaac, regarding Hashem’s choice to begin the Torah with the Creation story. R. Isaac ponders, “The Torah should have commenced with [the commandment of] ‘This month will be to you. . . (Exod. 12:1),’ the first commandment that Israel receives on the threshold of becoming a nation.<sup>73</sup> Assuming that the primary objective of the Torah is to serve as a law book to instruct Israel, R. Isaac questions the purpose of the story of creation within the Torah’s framework.<sup>74</sup> Applying the answer of R. Joshua from another midrashic source, Rashi qualifies that Hashem wanted to declare first and foremost to the nations of the world, “All of the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He. He created it and gave it to whom He deemed proper in His eyes.”<sup>75</sup> Hashem as Creator signifies Hashem as sovereign ruler over the destiny of the world. As Creator, Hashem has the absolute authority to determine the course of historical events and the fate of Israel and the nations of the world.

Significantly, Yeshayahu’s reminiscence of the redemption from Egypt and the giving of the Torah imparts how Hashem guides the progress of history to fulfill His divine plan for which the world was created. As Rashi, citing midrashic interpretation, expounds, “בראשית: For the sake of the Torah that is called ‘the beginning of His way (ראשית דרכו)’ [Prov. 8], and for the sake of Israel, that is called ‘the beginning of His harvest (ראשית תבואתה)’ (Jer. 2),” Hashem brought the world into existence.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> See Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, Gen. 1:2.

<sup>71</sup> Compare Yehezkel’s description of Israel’s exile among the nations as “the wilderness of the nations” (מדבר העמים) [Ezek. 20:35]; cf. Malbim on this text. Compare Isa. 64:9.

<sup>72</sup> Note that Yeshayahu in 45:19 observes that Hashem declares, “I did not say to the progeny of Jacob, ‘Seek me in *tohu*.’” תהו represents that state of contra-reality, an undesirable condition of existence.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Rashi’s citation and clarification of R. Isaac’s question in his commentary on Gen. 1:1. For the midrashic source, with a slightly different wording, see *Midrash Tanhuma, Bereishit*, 11.

<sup>74</sup> On this point, see the analysis of the Maharal, *Gur Aryeh*, ed. Yehoshua David Hartman (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 1989), Vol. I, Genesis, p. 2, on 1:1.

<sup>75</sup> Rashi, Gen. 1:1, based on *GenR*. 1:2. This response applies Ps. 111:6, by interpreting that “the power of His actions” which God revealed to His people is that He is the Creator, which gives Him the jurisdiction to “give them the heritage of the nations.”

<sup>76</sup> Rashi, Gen. 1:1, based on *GenR*. 1:4; *Vayikra Rabbah* 36:4.

Numerous verbal cues stimulate the attuned reader to recollect various facets of the creation process. Yeshayahu recalls the activities of creation, by invoking the very first verb describing this process, ברא. Hashem is described as “the Creator of the earth from end to end” (40:28) and of the hosts of the heavens (40:26).<sup>77</sup> The absolute guarantee of the word of Hashem which Yeshayahu associates with Hashem’s eternity (40:8) alludes to Hashem’s declarations (ויאמר אלקים), which marked the creation activities of each of the six days of creation.<sup>78</sup> The primary components of the world that Hashem created with careful planning and design - water, heavens, the hosts of the heavens, the dust of the earth, and the mountains- are invoked (40:12, 21-22, 26). The calling of names of each of the heavenly hosts (40:26) recalls Hashem naming His creations (Gen. 1:5, 8, 10).<sup>79</sup> The voice of Hashem that pervades the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8) is echoed in the mysterious voices that herald the redemption (40:3-4, 6-8, 9-11). The description of the world in its raw state of תהו ובהו, juxtaposed with the evocative synonyms imparting the idea of nothingness (איך; אפס), is an image adapted by Yeshayahu in order to graphically portray Hashem’s singular, incomparable status in relation to world powers (40:17, 23). The “רוח” of Hashem that appears over the waters in Gen. 1:2 is re-positioned in relation to the grasses and flowers (40:7), and imparted with a double, allusive meaning of “wind” and “spirit,” the latter meaning especially applying to 40:13, which dwells on Hashem’s creative wisdom in the formation of the world. In that regard, it is instructive to note that רוח אלקים, the designation in the creation account, is also associated with the bestowal upon select individuals of a divine wisdom, which gives them the resources and creativity to accomplish great things. Yosef is attributed with this divine gift by Pharaoh after interpreting the king’s dreams (Gen. 41:38), and Bezalel is given this capacity in order to fashion the vessels of the Mishkan (Exod. 31:3, 35:31). As a resourceful and creative being, Hashem brought the world into existence through great planning and forethought.<sup>80</sup>

Metaphors and similes that strive to impart the strong contrast between Hashem’s capacities and stature in relation to His creations apply imageries from plant life (40:6-8, 16, 24) and animal life (40:11, 16, 22, 31). Hashem’s reliable commitment to fulfill His word is starkly contrasted with the transitory, dubious condition of the human being, whose strength and ability to fulfill his intent is compared to the flower of the field<sup>81</sup> and grass, which easily dry up when the wind/spirit (רוח) of Hashem blows on them (40:6-8).<sup>82</sup> If one interprets Gen. 1:2 to refer to a “divine *wind blowing*

<sup>77</sup> Yeshayahu applies other verbs of creation, such as עשה and יצר, in other prophecies of consolation, as, for example, 45:7.

<sup>78</sup> Compare as well Isa. 40:26, in which the verb “call” (קרא) is also invoked in relation to the bringing forth of the stars, reminiscent of the creation story; similarly this verb and that of “say” (אמר), which are used in relation to the announcing voices, recall the creation narrative (Isa. 40:3, 6, 9).

<sup>79</sup> Compare as well Adam’s naming of the animals (Gen. 2:19-20).

<sup>80</sup> For this analysis of “רוח אלקים,” see Avraham Walfish “Chaotic Language and Systematic Interpretation: An Analysis of Genesis 1:2,” *Nahalat* 1 (1999), pp. 116-17, and nn. 44-45, who applies this meaning of Hashem’s spirit to indicate how Hashem goes about transforming the state of תהו ובהו into a world that is hospitable for sustaining life.

<sup>81</sup> This is another allusion to the creation account, which references the trees and grasses of the field in Gen. 2:5.

<sup>82</sup> Compare similar imagery and messages in Ps. 103. Cf. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books Pub., 1985), pp. 191-92, who observes about this metaphor “... God’s power is a hot wind that makes

over the waters,” to reveal the dry land so that the earth becomes habitable,<sup>83</sup> then the application of this imagery in Yeshayahu’s prophecy acquires an ironic reversal of meaning. In this context, the divine “wind” now conveys an image of powerlessness and frailty of the human who can disappear into oblivion if Hashem wills it. Human beings are compared to grasshoppers (40:22), but when Hashem desires, they can be given the ability to fly tirelessly as eagles (40:31). Perhaps the herald’s declaration that Israel need not fear any longer (40:9) may be seen as a counterpart to the fear that gripped the first couple when faced with the consequences of punishment because of the first sin (Gen. 3:10). Similarly, in an allusion to the eating from the “Tree of Knowledge Good and Bad,” Yeshayahu implores the nation to acquire the proper form of knowledge and understanding (40:21, 28).<sup>84</sup>

By framing his prophecy of comfort against the backdrop of the creation narrative, Yeshayahu sets out to convey the message that Hashem as Creator has the exclusive and singular powers to determine the path of the world’s future. In order to accentuate how he envisions the pivotal role of the Creation event in relation to the guarantee of redemption, the prophet illustrates Hashem’s prolific enterprising activities in a manner that distinguishes Hashem from all of His creations. “To whom could you liken Me? To whom can I be compared? (Isa. 40:25; compare 40:18). Hashem’s creative genius is marked by His infinite and independent wisdom, planning, and careful assessment of each step of the process. “Who directed the spirit of God . . . Whom has He consulted?” (Isa. 40:13-14). Only God has the capabilities to, as if, measure, weigh, and assemble all the components of the world, as a master architect who meticulously crafts each aspect of the creation. “Who has measured the waters with his palm, calibrated the heavens with a span, weighed the earth’s dust with a measure. . . ?” (Isa. 40:12). To the rhetorical, pedagogically oriented question, there is but one answer. God is unparalleled to His creations.<sup>85</sup>

These unrivaled descriptions of Hashem in relation to the creation process nullify the impression among the nations of the world of their invincibility and indomitable powers. Yeshayahu’s depiction of God as Creator frames his rhetoric concerning the relative worthlessness of human values, aspirations, and activities. “All the nations are as nothing before Him; they are accounted by Him as nothingness, emptiness” (40:17); “Who turns princes into nothing, judges of the land into emptiness” (40:23). With scathing imagery, Yeshayahu compares the nations of the world to the raw state of *תהו ובהו*, a state which represents a reversal of creation and the purpose for which the world came into being. The products of human

---

transient growing things wither, but God’s spirit is also the source of His promise to Israel, through covenant and prophecy, which will be fulfilled . . . while human things and human faithfulness vanish in the wilderness of time.”

<sup>83</sup> For this reading, see Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, Gen. 1:2.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Isa. 40:14, which speaks of Hashem’s infinite knowledge and wisdom of the absolute standards of justice.

<sup>85</sup> Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55*, pp. 36-37, points out that Yeshayahu’s focus on the imagery of scales and weighing might also serve as a polemic against Babylonian mythos that assigns such capabilities to the gods, who are described as performing comparable actions in relation to their sovereignty over the world. Cf. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1955), p. 332a, lines 224, 241-42, describing the Babylonian god, Marduk, as the “Lord of the world, king of the gods, divine Marduk, who establishes the plan . . . Who measures the waters of the seas . . .”; p. 387b, lines 22-23, describing the sun god, Shamash, “holding the ends of the earth suspended from the midst of heaven. The people of the world, all of them, thou dost watch over.” Note as well, *ibid.*, p. 387b, line 26, describing this god as “their shepherd both above and below.”

activity, idol making, are mocked and reduced to worthlessness. The artisan who thinks he can create a product that will never fall apart is taunted (40:20). The thought that goes into producing these false forms of worship, selecting a tree that will not rot and choosing precious metals of gold and silver for the overlay (40:19), is considered for naught as compared to the thoughtfulness and wisdom of Hashem's creative activities (40:21; compare 40:13). Nations that think they are in control of their fates are weightless,<sup>86</sup> barely discernible as a drop in the bucket, as dust on the scales (40:15). Rulers and princes are easily uprooted, cast off into the wind (40:24). Peoples who have convinced themselves that they have limitless powers are reminded that from Hashem's perspective above the earth, they are as minute as grasshoppers (40:22), for only Hashem is infinite, unbound by concrete images, never tiring, his wisdom fathomless (40:28).<sup>87</sup>

As Moshe Weinfeld has observed, Yeshayahu sharpens his meaning by shifting the focus of certain aspects of the Genesis account in order to present a clear message regarding Hashem's unmatched powers.<sup>88</sup> Relevant to chapter 40, while the creation narrative indicates that the human being is created with a divine-like "image" (Gen 1:26-בצלמנו כדמותנו; compare Gen. 5:1-בדמות אלקים עשה אתו), Yeshayahu reiterates that there is no image or likeness that can be assigned to Hashem (40:18; 40:25). What Yeshayahu aims to emphasize, as noted by Robert Alter, is that "God is perfectly free to fashion a human creature in his own likeness, but it is utterly beyond the creature's capacity to fashion a likeness for his creator."<sup>89</sup> While one might surmise that Hashem took counsel at least with regard to the creation of the human being (as noted in Gen. 1:26-בצלמנו אדם . . . , *Let us make man*), Yeshayahu emphasizes that Hashem had no advisors in the creation of the world (40:13-14).<sup>90</sup> Although Hashem is described as "resting" on the seventh day after completing the work of creation, Yeshayahu portrays Hashem as never tiring or growing weary (40:28). By recasting various elements of the creation account, Yeshayahu zeroes in on his intent for incorporating the first chapters of the Torah into his

<sup>86</sup> Note the imagery of the scales in Daniel 5:25-28, in which the "writing on the wall" is interpreted by Daniel to mean that Hashem has, as if, weighed the Babylonian Empire on the scales of justice, and it was deemed to be weightless and deserving of destruction. On the symbolism of this vision in relation to the significance of the scale and weights imagery, see Al Wolters, "The Riddle of the Scales in Daniel 5," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 62 (1991): 155-177.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (Basic Books, 1992), p. 82, who observes how the "grotesque, and inaccurate, simile used by the spies in a reflex of fear" in Num. 13:33, "becomes an accurate gauge of the disproportion between creator and creatures or, indeed, a kind of cosmic understatement."

<sup>88</sup> For all of these examples and others deriving from related chapters in Sefer Yeshayahu, see Moshe Weinfeld, "האל הבורא בבראשית א ובנבואת ישעיהו השני," *Tarbiz* 37 (1967-68): 105-132, especially 121-26.

<sup>89</sup> Alter, *World of Biblical Literature*, p. 81.

<sup>90</sup> Compare Isa. 44:24, who emphasizes, "I am Hashem Who has made everything, Who alone spread out the heavens, Who spread out the earth. . ." Cf. *GenR.* 3:8, which cites this text, based on the *ktiv*, in which the last words of this verse read, "מי אתי" - who was with me [the *qere* being rendered as מֵ-אִתִּי], in order to emphasize that the angels did not assist Hashem in creating the world. Compare *GenR.* 1:9, which cites Isa. 45:6-7, in order to highlight that Hashem did not use eternal raw materials in order to create the universe; everything (as, for example, darkness) was created by Hashem. Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55*, pp. 40-41, also observes that this declaration might serve as a polemic against the Babylonian Creation Epic that describes the chief god, Marduk, as a recipient of the advice of Ea, his father, as related in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 64, Tablet II, lines 97-98; p. 68, Tablet VI, lines 3-19.

prophecy of consolation. With unambiguous emphasis, Yeshayahu sets Hashem apart from all of His creations in order to impress upon Bnei Yisrael that the eternal, irrevocable guarantee of their salvation is sustained by its divine source.

Although the capacity on the part of Am Yisrael to “listen” and “understand” seems to be lacking in the time of Yeshayahu, the prophet now calls upon them to heed the message of the Creation narrative which reveals the essential attributes of Hashem that are knowable to all human beings, attributes that will assure even the skeptics among them of the approaching redemption.

Yeshayahu harshly rebukes the nation in the haftarah which we read prior to Tisha be-Av, “An ox knows its owner and a donkey- its master’s trough; but Israel does not know, my nation does not comprehend” (Isa. 1:3).<sup>91</sup> Yet, in his prophecy of comfort, he implores Bnei Yisrael to hear and listen, for the key to their faith in redemption has already been provided for them “from the beginning” (בראש), through the Torah’s revelation of the creation account (40:21). “Have you not pondered the foundations of the earth?” (40:21). Just as Hashem controls the natural order of the earth, sitting above the earth (40:22), so, too, does Hashem control the political and historical underpinnings of the world. Hashem overturns those rulers and monarchs whose powers are undeserved (40:23), and guarantees the future of Am Yisrael, who will bring about a new historical truth in which they will fulfill the ultimate purpose for the creation of the world. Perceiving through the spectrum of time, from the past to the present and into the future, Hashem assures His people that the time will come when their rightful place among the nations will be re-instituted.<sup>92</sup>

Throughout this prophecy, Yeshayahu reiterates that in order for the redemption to be actualized, Hashem must “re-align” and “re-calibrate” the balance of the world powers, with Hashem at the helm, completely acknowledged as the sovereign ruler over the world, and Bnei Yisrael returned to Eretz Yisrael under the guidance of the Mashiach. The vibrancy of Bnei Yisrael is dependent on its understanding of its relationship to Hashem who is the sole source for their sustained and prosperous existence. Fear and hiding from the “voice” of Hashem only came about as a result of sin and betrayal (Gen. 3:8-10). The absence of fear will become pronounced when Israel is able to declare that “our God” has revealed Himself in His strength to redeem them (40:9-11), so that now they will be able to fulfill the Torah and mitzvot as a sovereign nation.

To those among Israel who question if there is divine providence within the world, declaring, “My way is hidden from Hashem and my cause is ignored by my God” (40:27), Yeshayahu answers that the creation account bears testimony to Hashem as the “eternal God, Creator of the earth from end to end, who never wearies or tires, whose wisdom is unfathomed” (40:28). This serves as incontrovertible proof that having established the world on its foundations, Hashem has a vested interest in strengthening those who trust in Him (40:31) to bring the world to its future destiny.

---

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Isa. 6:9-10, which describes the Israelites’ inability to perceive and understand the ramifications of their actions. On the juxtaposition of the text of Isaiah 6 with chapter 40, see Craig A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6.9-10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), p. 45, and see his related discussion of this theme in other chapters of Isaiah, *ibid.*, pp. 42-46.

<sup>92</sup> Compare Isa. 41:4 and 46:10, for a similar message.



As R. Behaye notes in the introduction to his analysis of the creation narrative, “שכל שרשי האמונה, נסמכים ונשענים על אמונת החדוש, כי החדוש מופת על ההשגחה וההשגחה מופת על גודל הנבואה ועל אמתת עונש ושכר.” All of the dogmatic principles of faith are dependent on belief in the divine creation of the world. Creation serves as proof for providence. Providence is proof of the greatness of prophecy, the Torah, and of the existence of reward and punishment in the world.<sup>93</sup>

In connection with this message of Hashem’s providential concern over the destiny of His nation, Yeshayahu’s portrayal of Hashem’s “רוח,” as the creative spirit that was exclusively responsible for creation (40:13), may serve an additional purpose if one considers alternative meanings of the description of His רוח in Gen. 1:2. Assuming that the term, מרחפת, means “hovering” (not: blowing), Rashi describes how Hashem’s throne of Glory was suspended over the waters.<sup>94</sup> Applying this explanation, one may conceive of Hashem in a role of paternal protectiveness over the world that He has just created. As U. Cassuto, adapting a similar rendition of this image, explains, “[T]he paternal care of the Divine Spirit, which hovered over it, assured its future evolution and life.”<sup>95</sup> Hashem’s spirit which established His caring presence in the world ensures that His providence will ultimately bring about the final redemption. This impression is carried through in Yeshayahu’s portrait of Hashem the shepherd carrying His flock in His arm and guiding them to their destination (40:11).

Yeshayahu’s vision of redemption as a “new creation,” as a re-setting of the world, is expressed in later chapters of his prophecy. “For I (Hashem) am creating new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17; cf. 66:22), where former suffering will be erased from our national memory. In this context, Yeshayahu emphasizes that Hashem is “creating Jerusalem a joy and its people a rejoicing” (65:18). When Bnei Yisrael begin to repopulate their cities, where only the sounds of happiness will fill its streets (65:19, 66:10), then it will become evident that the goal of creation is being fulfilled.<sup>96</sup> Continuing to capitalize on the significance of the event of Creation, Yeshayahu describes how Hashem’s creative powers will ultimately be channeled to bring about the revival of Am Yisrael. As he pictorially relates, “Your people, who will all be righteous, will possess the land for eternity. They are the shoot of My planting (נצר מטעי) . . .” (Isa. 60:21). It is Hashem who can also make the “dry” nation of Israel grow and flourish once again. Similarly, Yeshayahu observes, “And now hear Yaakov, my servant, and Israel whom I have chosen. Thus

---

<sup>93</sup> Cf. R. Behaye, ed. Hayyim Dov Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1966), Vol. I, Genesis, Introduction, p. 13. R. Behaye applies Ps. 111:6, as does Rashi in his first comments on the creation story, but he emphasizes the first part of this verse. While Hashem’s essence is unknowable, He revealed Himself through his actions which are able to be comprehended and can teach about Hashem’s relations to His creations (כה מעשיו הגיד לעמו). This explanation may be seen as a response to Ramban, Gen. 1:1, who accentuates the esoteric aspects of the creation story.

<sup>94</sup> See Rashi, Gen. 1:2, apparently applying Deut. 32:11; for this meaning of מרחפת, cf. GenR. 2:4. However, Ibn Ezra, Gen. 1:2, renders the meaning of this term in Deut. 32, to connote “blowing.”

<sup>95</sup> See Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part One: From Adam to Noah*, translated by Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1961), p. 25.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Abarbanel’s commentary on Isa. 65:17, analyzing, based on Rashi’s interpretation, that there will also be a celestial re-alignment, in which the heavenly powers that influence the nations will be rendered impotent, while Hashem will renew His special providence over the nation of Israel, which will also bring about a rejuvenation of the land of Israel.

said Hashem who made you and formed you from the womb, Who will help you (יעזורך).<sup>97</sup> Do not fear, my servant Yaakov . . . For just as I will pour water on the thirsty [land] and flowing water on the dry ground, so I will pour out My spirit on your offspring and My blessing on your progeny. And they will grow between the grass like willows by streams of water” (Isa. 44: 1-4). Adapting imagery and verbal cues from the Creation story, Yeshayahu emphasizes that Hashem’s spirit which was present when the world came into being will re-create Israel and transform its condition at the time of redemption.<sup>98</sup>

Nevertheless, while Yeshayahu declares that redemption signals a new beginning, it must be understood that it is predicated and founded on Hashem’s original plan for creation. This momentous “re-creation” is not intended as a nullification of the original creation, but an overhaul in which all powers of the world are put back in their proper place, as Hashem had originally intended, before man’s sinful ways corrupted the ideal world condition.<sup>99</sup>

“Hashem saw that it was good (וירא אלקים כי טוב),” is the repeated refrain as each day of creation is completed. When Hashem fulfills His promise to Bnei Yisrael at the time of redemption, every being will “see” and perceive how Hashem restores the world, its course of history and destiny (Isa. 40:5), to its optimal state. Israel will then be able to declare, corresponding to the herald of Isa. 40:9, “How pleasant are the footsteps of the herald on the mountains, who declares peace and brings tidings of good, who pronounces salvation, saying to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’ (Isa. 52:7).<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> This description of Hashem as a “helper” to revive Israel is also noted by Yeshayahu in 41:13. In this reference, I hear an echo of the creation of woman as עוזר כנגדו (Gen. 2:18). Hashem wanted man to have a worthy companion and partner to assist in attaining the goals for which humanity was created; she is his “counterpart alongside him and in relation to him;” compare the rendering of כנגדו in the commentary of Shmuel David Luzzatto (Shadal) on Gen. 2:18, ed. P. Schlesinger (Tel Aviv: Dvir Pub., 1965), p. 26, and see Rav Hirsch’s explanation of עוזר כנגדו in his commentary on 2:18, in *The Pentateuch: Translation and Commentary by Samson Raphael Hirsch*, trans. by Isaac Levy (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1989), pp. 64-65. When nations of the world, however, behave in a manner that corrupts the purpose of creation, then Hashem views them as “כאיין נגדו,” as nothing in relation to Him. Hashem, however, serves to “help” and assure that the purpose of creation is implemented through His salvation of Bnei Yisrael from exile.

<sup>98</sup> For this reference of the resurrection of Israel in relation to the creation imagery, see Peter D. Miscall, “Isaiah: New Heavens, New Earth, New Book,” in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. by Danna Nolan Fewell (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 54. See as well, *ibid.*, pp. 48-55, for additional references to the creation account throughout the later chapters of Sefer Yeshayahu. Note especially his focus on the usage of the imageries of light and darkness in various aspects of Yeshayahu’s prophecy, as in Isa.45:7 and ch. 60. For additional analysis of the images of light, darkness, fire, water, and dryness in the later chapters of Sefer Yeshayahu, see also Peter D. Miscall, “Isaiah: Labyrinth of Images,” *Semeia* 54 (1991): 103-121.

<sup>99</sup> Compare Ramban, Deut. 30:6, in which he observes how humanity will return to its original state of discerning clear and correct choices, as was the situation prior to eating from the Tree of Knowledge.

<sup>100</sup> This redemptive state will be in stark contrast to the topsy turvy situation that will initially ensue among Bnei Yisrael, “who are saying that the bad is good, and the good is bad” (Isa. 5:20). Note as well Isa. 3:10, where he characterizes the righteous person as “good.”