

Rabbi Menachem Leibtag

Haftarat Bereishit: Yeshayahu – Poet, Prophet, and Parshan

1. Introduction

It is not by chance that the opening *haftarah* of *Sefer Bereishit* is taken from the *navi* Yeshayahu. No less than eighteen *haftarot* are taken from the book of *Yeshayahu*, including the first *haftarah* of almost every book of *Chumash*.³⁶ Likewise, the *haftarot* of every fast day and *Yom Kippur*, as well as the famous seven *haftarot* that follow *Tishah Be-Av*, are all taken from *Yeshayahu*.

This ‘popularity’ is not only due to the beauty of his poetry. As we will now demonstrate in our study of the *haftarah* for *Parashat Bereishit*, it is also because Yeshayahu could be considered one of the earliest commentators of the Bible, as his prophecies reflect a deeper understanding of some of the most basic themes of *Chumash*.

When studying *Sefer Yeshayahu*, we face a double challenge. First, merely translating his poetic Hebrew poses a formidable task. Second, we must consider his audience. Therefore, we will begin our study by translating the *haftarah*’s opening lines while paying attention to the prophet’s poetic style and his deliberate diction. Afterward, we will consider the historical setting, to uncover the deeper meaning of his prophecy.

2. Imagery from the Garden of Eden

A careful look at the *haftarah*’s opening sentence reveals how the *navi* skillfully utilizes key words from story of Creation in *Parashat Bereishit*:³⁷

מב,ה: כה־אמר האל יהוה, בורא השמים וְנוֹטִיָהֶם, רִקַּע הָאָרֶץ, וְצָצְאָהָּ; נָתַן נֶשְׁמָה לְעַם עֲלֵיָהּ, וְרוּחַ לְהִלְכֵימָּהּ.

Thus says the *El*, [short for *Elokim* – the name of God in *Bereishit* ch. 1]

Hashem [*yud-hey-vav-hey*] – [the name of God in *Bereishit* ch. 2]

Creator of the heavens [*Borei ha-shamayim*], who stretched them out,

Who spread forth [*roka*] the earth [*ha-aretz*], and that what comes from it,

Who gives a soul [*neshamah*] to the people upon it,

And spirit [*ruach*] to those who walk in it.

Note that the *navi* begins by employing imagery from the Six Days of Creation (*Bereishit* ch. 1), “*borei*,” “*shamayim*,” “*roka*,” “*aretz*” (see *Bereishit* 1:1–8); afterward, he uses the word “*neshamah*” (see *Bereishit* 2:7), a key word from the story of God’s Creation of Man in *Gan Eden* (*Bereishit* ch. 2).

Note, as well, that unlike most prophecies that begin with the short preface “*ko amar Hashem*” – “This is the word of God,” this specific *nevuah* begins with a more lengthy description of God, suggesting a thematic connection between this description and the forthcoming message.

Especially important is its second half, which describes God as “He who gave man a *neshamah*. Even though there are numerous times in *Tanakh* where God is referred to as Creator of Heaven and Earth, rarely do we find God described as “He who gave man a *neshamah*.” This suggests that the *navi* may be alluding to a thematic connection between the forthcoming *nevuah* and the Biblical story of *Gan Eden*, where the word “*neshamah*” appears for the very first time and describes the spiritual nature of God’s creation of man.³⁸

³⁶. Except the *haftarah* for *Parashat Bemidbar*, which is taken from his contemporary Hoshea (ch. 2).

³⁷. Most likely, this is why the *haftarah* begins specifically with this verse.

³⁸. Man is formed as a mixture *guf* – from the dust of the earth, and *neshamah* – his spiritual character.

Recall, as well, that God placed man in *Gan Eden* for a purpose: “*le-avdah u-le-shamrah*” – “to serve and protect it” (see *Bereishit* 2:15). We will now show how this specific theme of being an ‘*eved Hashem*’ – God’s creation of man to serve Him, relates directly to the *navi*’s forthcoming message.

Let’s take, for example, the first verse of chapter 42, which introduces our *haftarah* (that begins five verses later in 42:5):

“הֵן עַבְדִּי אֶתְמַקְּבוּ, בְּחִירִי רִצְתָה נְפֹשִׁי; נָתַתִּי רוּחִי עָלָיו...”

Behold **My servant**³⁹ – I will support him, My chosen one, in whom I delight, I have put my spirit⁴⁰ upon him...”

An even better example is found when we take into consideration that our *haftarah* is part of a much larger unit in *Sefer Yeshayahu* – better known as the “*nevuot nechamah*” – “the Prophecies of Comfort” – which begins two chapters earlier with the famous opening line, “*Nachamu, nachamu ami...*” (40:1).⁴¹ This final section of *Sefer Yeshayahu* (chs. 40 thru 66) focuses on God’s call to His people to leave the Babylonian Exile and return to the Promised Land.⁴² Within this section, the *navi* explains how God is eager to facilitate their return, but also how He constantly reminds them that they must remember **why** they were chosen – i.e. to serve God – in order to become worthy of that redemption.⁴³

In this context, this concept of being an ‘*eved Hashem*’ was first introduced in chapter 41:

מֵא, ח: וְאַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדִּי, יַעֲקֹב אֲשֶׁר בְּחַרְתִּיךָ; זָרַע, אֲבָרָהֶם אֲהַבִּי. מֵא, ט: אֲשֶׁר הִחַזְקְתִּיךָ מִקְצוֹת הָאָרֶץ, וּמֵאֲצִילֶיהָ קָרָאתִיךָ; וְאָמַר לְךָ עַבְדִּי-אַתָּה, בְּחַרְתִּיךָ וְלֹא מֵאֲסַתִּיךָ.

And you Israel **My servant**, Jacob whom I have chosen...whom I have drawn from the edges of the earth, and whom I have called upon it from its far corners. To whom I have said: **You are My servant**, I have chosen you – I have not rejected you. (41:8–9)

Later on, we find this very same message repeated in the last *pasuk* of this week’s *haftarah*:

מג, י: אַתֶּם עֵדֵי נְאֻם-יְהוָה, וְעַבְדִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּחַרְתִּי...

You are my witness, says *Hashem*, and **My servant** whom I have chosen...(43:10)

And then again, in the beginning of chapter 44:

מד, א: וְעַתָּה שְׁמַע, יַעֲקֹב עַבְדִּי; וְיִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּחַרְתִּי בּוֹ.

But hear now, Jacob, **My servant**, and Israel, whom I have chosen. (44:1)

Finally, note how the *navi* concludes this section with the same theme:

מד, כֹּא: זָכַר-אֱלֹהִים יַעֲקֹב, וְיִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי עַבְדִּי-אַתָּה; יִצְרַתִּיךָ עַבְדִּי-לִי אַתָּה...

Remember these things – Jacob, for you Israel are **My servant**, I created you as a **servant** – you are for Me...(44:21)

Clearly, this theme that *Am Yisrael* was (and remains) chosen to serve God is central to this entire section of *Sefer Yeshayahu*. Therefore, by alluding to *Gan Eden* in his introductory description of God, Yeshayahu’s goal is not to supply *information*; rather, it is to provide *inspiration*! In other words, the *navi* is not describing God so that *Am Yisrael* will know who He is; rather, his *Bereishit*-themed description of God will remind *Am Yisrael* that they were chosen to serve God in the Land of Israel, just like man was created to serve God in the Garden of Eden.⁴⁴

³⁹. The ‘servant’ may be referring to either the *navi* or to *Am Yisrael*. Either way, the parallel remains significant.

⁴⁰. Note the word “*ruach*” in both 42:1 and 42:5; further proof that 42:1 introduces 42:5.

⁴¹. This is the *haftarah* for the *Shabbat* immediately after *Tishah Be-Av*.

⁴². This is stated explicitly in 48:20, and alluded to throughout this entire unit. See also *Ezra* 1:1–3.

⁴³. See also 44:21–28.

⁴⁴. This Biblical theme is alluded to by *Moshe Rabbeinu* in *Devarim* 30:15–20.

3. The Historical Setting

When we consider the historical setting of this *nevuah*, the prophet's introductory allusion to the story of *Gan Eden* becomes even more significant. Recall that the Garden of Eden narrative concludes with man's banishment due to his sinful behavior. Similarly, the *navi* is addressing the nation of Israel which has recently been exiled from its land as punishment for its rebellious behavior against God.

After man was banished from *Gan Eden*, God placed the *keruvim* to guard the path of return (see *Bereishit* 3:22–24).⁴⁵ But this raises the question: Is man banned forever, or can he return, if he repents in his exile and decides to serve God faithfully? This very same question now faces *Am Yisrael* in exile. Can (or will) they return once again to serve God in the Land; or are they banished forever?

The *navi's* allusion to *Gan Eden* relates directly to this question, for this is the prophet's primary message at this specific time in Jewish history. In the first section of *Sefer Yeshayahu* (chs. 1 thru 12), the *navi* explained why *Am Yisrael* deserved to be punished. In its final section, the *navi* must explain to the people in exile that return is indeed possible, but only on the condition that they accept their destiny of servitude to God.

This specific message was critical during the time period of the Babylonian exile, for *Am Yisrael* had every reason to think differently. The destruction of the Temple, and their exile to *Bavel*, led many to the logical conclusion that God had abandoned them. The special covenant between God and His people was broken. Consequently, the people assumed that their fate was now in the hands of foreign powers and that they must now seek the favor of other (local) gods for their salvation.⁴⁶ It was their understanding that exile was an irreversible process.

This historical background explains the prophetic setting for this entire set of *nevuot nechamah* that begin in chapter 40, since the prophet must counter these mistaken conclusions.

First, the *navi* must comfort his people while admitting that the severity of their punishment may have been disproportionate (see 40:1–2). Then, God declares that He is coming to be with His people once again, and that there are no other gods (see 40:3–26). The *navi* must also refute the people's claim that God no longer sees them (40:27–31) – quite the opposite, in fact, as God is eager to redeem His nation (see 41:1–7).

At this point, the *navi* first introduces his central theme of *eved Hashem*:

מָא, ח-ט: וְאַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדִּי... אֲשֶׁר הִחַזְקִיתִּיךָ מִקְצוֹת הָאָרֶץ, וּמֵאַצִּילֶיהָ קָרָאתִיךָ; וְאָמַר לְךָ עַבְדִּי-אַתָּה, בְּחַרְתִּיךָ וְלֹא מֵאַסְתִּיךָ.

And you Israel **My servant**,...whom I have drawn from the edges of the earth, and whom I have called upon it from its far corners. To whom I have said: **You are My servant**, I have chosen you – **I have not rejected you**. (41:8–9)

The last phrase – “I have not rejected you” – is thematically important, for it counters *Am Yisrael's* deep feelings of rejection. Therefore, the *navi* must continue to allay those fears (see 41:10–16), while promising that God will facilitate their redemption (see 41:17–29) on the condition that they understand **why** they are being returned – so they can serve God.

This theme of being an ‘*eved Hashem*’ continues in the beginning of chapter 42, and forms the introduction to our *haftarah*:

מֵב, א: הֵן עַבְדִּי אֶתְמַרְבּוּ, בְּחִירִי רִצְתָה נַפְשִׁי; נִתְתִּי רוּחִי עָלָיו, מִשְׁפָּט לְגוֹיִם יוֹצִיא...

Behold, my **servant** – I will support him; My chosen one in whom I delight, I put My spirit upon him, he shall teach judgment to the nations...

In its immediate context (see 41:25–29), the servant described in 42:1 may refer to the Messiah, being sent by God to redeem His people.⁴⁷ However, in the wider context of the unit, especially based on 41:8–9 (see above), the “*eved*” may once again refer to the nation of Israel, chosen by God to deliver His message of justice and righteousness to all mankind.⁴⁸

⁴⁵. Later on in *Chumash*, we find *keruvim* covering the Ark of the Covenant, and guarding the entrance to the Temple. This parallel suggests that the Torah becomes the venue by which man can return to the *Gan Eden* environment.

⁴⁶. See *Yechezkel* 20:32.

⁴⁷. See *Metzudot* and Radak.

⁴⁸. See *Da'at Mikra* on 42:1, based on *Yeshayahu* 2:1–5, *Devarim* 4:5–8, and *Bereishit* 18:18–19.

This contextual and historical setting sets the stage for our *haftarah*. As we explained in the first section of our essay, in 42:5 the prophet introduces his next message with a thematically significant description of God, alluding to the themes of ‘servitude’ and ‘exile’ in *Gan Eden*. In 42:6–7, his specific message begins with:

מב, ו: אָנִי יְהוָה קְרָאתִיךָ בְצִדְקָה, וְאַחֲזַק בְּיָדֶךָ; וְאַצְרֶךָ, וְאַתְּנֶנְךָ לְבְרִית עַם-לְאֹרֹת גּוֹיִם. מִב, ז: לִפְקֹם, עֵינַיִם עֲרוּרוֹת; לְהוֹצִיא מִמִּסְגַּר אֲסִיר, מִבַּיִת כָּלֵא יִשְׁבֵי חֹשֶׁךְ...

I am God, I have called upon you in righteousness, I took you by the hand and guarded you, and **appointed you a covenant nation, to be a light unto nations**, to open the eyes of the blind, to rescue prisoners from the dungeon... (see 42:6–9)

As God now calls upon His nation to return, He first explains that He has been guarding them and is now prepared to help them. This must be stated up front, to counter their mistaken understanding that God had left them.

Then God must explain *why* He is redeeming them – in order that they be a light to the other nations – to help them see and understand the concept of God. The metaphor of revealing the light to those blind to it assumes that one who does not perceive God could metaphorically be considered ‘blind’ or ‘imprisoned.’⁴⁹

Note as well, how the *navi* returns to the imagery he employed in 42:5. There, God gave a *neshamah* to the nation,⁵⁰ and now, in 42:6, he explains how God made a “*berit am*” – a covenant with that nation – to serve as a light to other nations.

Through this parallel, the *navi* wants *Am Yisrael* to appreciate and better understand why they were chosen – to serve God by following the Torah, thus becoming a light to other nations (see *Devarim* 4:5–8 and *Yeshayahu* 2:1–5).

Here we see an example of *Yeshayahu* providing us with an early commentary on the underlying theme of *Sefer Bereishit*, as the *navi* draws a parallel between God’s creation of man to serve Him in *Gan Eden* (giving “*neshamah le-am*”), and His entering into a covenant with that nation (“*berit am*”) later on in *Sefer Bereishit*.

According to this parallel, the *Gan Eden* motif in *Parashat Bereishit* sets the thematic stage for God’s choice of *Am Yisrael* in *Sefer Bereishit*.

With this in mind, let us quickly review the key points in the remainder of the *haftarah*.

In 42:8–9, God reminds *Am Yisrael* once again that He is the only God, and He is giving them advance knowledge of the historic events that are about to occur – so that they can recognize His hand behind these events, and sing (in response) God’s due praise (see 42:10–13).

In 42:14–17, God admits that He has been ‘quiet’ for the last several decades, but now He promises to become more actively involved in *Am Yisrael*’s redemption (employing the powerful imagery of a mother in labor, giving birth to her child) – to the point that those who trusted in other gods will be embarrassed, as God’s hand behind these events will become obvious.

In 42:18–25, God rebukes His nation for not perceiving the Divine hand behind these events, referring to His servant (*Am Yisrael*) as blind and deaf, even though they have eyes and ears. The *navi* must explain once again, that *Am Yisrael* was exiled due to their sins, and not because God abandoned them (see 42:23–25), and that He is now ready to redeem them – calling upon them to recognize that they remain God’s people (see 43:1–3).

Over and over again in this section, God encourages His nation not to fear, for He is with them, and still loves them (see 43:1–6). The *haftarah* ends as the *navi* reviews all the key points that he had made earlier (see 43:7–10).

4. The parallels to *Tehillim* 107

Even though it is beyond the scope of this essay to explain every *pasuk* of this week’s *haftarah*, we conclude our study with one small insight, paying attention to another element in regard to the beauty and thematic depth of the *navi*’s choice of words.

When reading this *haftarah*, anyone with a sensitive ear to the book of *Tehillim* will surely have noticed several key phrases from Psalm 107. For example:

(42:7) *asir, yoshvei choshekh* –

⁴⁹. Some commentators understand that God is addressing the prophet (and not the nation). If so, then, God is articulating the prophet’s mission – to make *Am Yisrael* into God’s nation, to help them ‘see the light,’ and take them out of the prison of exile, etc. (See Rashi and *Metzudot*, vs. Radak and *Da’at Mikra*.)

⁵⁰. See Radak. There is a wide range of opinions in regard to the translation of this phrase, based on the translation of “*am*” in 42:5. It is due to a similar phrase in 49:8, which seems to refer to the *navi* himself, and not the people of Israel.

- yoshvei choshekh ve-tzalmavet, asirei ani (107:10)
 (42:10) yordei ha-yam, shiru la-Hashem –
 vi-sapru ma'asav be-rinah, yordei ha-yam ba-anivot (107:22–23)
 (42:11) midbar –
 ta'u ba-midbar (107:4)
 (42:15) ve-samti neharot la-iyim; va-agamim ovish –
 yaseim neharot la-midbar, yaseim midbar la-agam mayim (107:33–35)
 (42:16) be-derekh...adrikheim –
 va-yadrikheim be-derekh yesharah (107:7)
 (43:1) geulei Hashem –
 geulei Hashem (107:2)
 (43:5–6) mi-mizrach...u-mi-ma'arav akabetzkha; tzafon –
 u-me'aratzot kibetzeim, mi-mizrach u-ma'arav, mi-tzfon u-mi-yam (107:3)

The following table summarizes the above parallels:

Tehillim 107	Yeshayahu
א הִדּוּ לַיהוָה כִּי־טוֹב: כִּי לַעֲוֹלָם חֲסָדּוֹ.	
ב יֹאמְרוּ, גְּאוּלֵי יְהוָה־אֲשֶׁר גָּאֵלָם, מִיַּד־צָר.	43:1
ג וּמְאָרְצוֹת קִבְּצִים־מִמִּזְרָח וּמִמְעַרְב; מִצְפוֹן וּמִיָּם.	43:5–6
ד תַּעֲנוּ בַמִּדְבָּר, בִּישִׁימוֹן דֶּרֶךְ; עִיר מוֹשָׁב, לֹא מִצָּאוּ.	42:11/40:3
ה רְעֵבִים גַּם־צִמְאִים־נִפְשָׁם, בָּהֶם תִּתְעַשֶּׂף.	42:22–24/
ו וַיִּצְעֲקוּ אֶל־יְהוָה, בַּצָּר לָהֶם; מִמִּצּוֹקוֹתֵיהֶם, יִצִּילֵם.	42:16
ז וַיִּדְרִיכֵם, בְּדֶרֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְלֶכֶת, אֶל־עִיר מוֹשָׁב.	42:12
ח יִדּוּ לַיהוָה חֲסָדּוֹ; וּנְפִלְאוֹתָיו, לְבְנֵי אָדָם.	
ט כִּי־הִשְׁבִּיעַ, נֶפֶשׁ שִׁקְקָה; וּנְפֶשׁ רַעֲבָה, מִלֹּא־טוֹב.	42:7
י יֹשְׁבֵי, חֹשֶׁךְ וְצִלְמוֹת; אֲסִירֵי עֵנִי וּבְרָזֶל.	42:10
יא כִּי־הִמְרוּ אִמְרֵי־אֵל; וַעֲצַת עֲלִיוֹן נֶאֱצוּ... כג יוֹרְדֵי הַיָּם, בְּאֲנִיּוֹת; עֲשֵׂי מְלָאכָה, בְּמַיִם רַבִּים.	
כד הִמָּה רָאוּ, מַעֲשֵׂי יְהוָה; וּנְפִלְאוֹתָיו, בְּמִצּוֹלָה... לג יֵשׁם נְהַרּוֹת לְמִדְבָּר; וּמִצְאֵי מַיִם, לְצִמְאוֹן.	42:15 41:18
לד אֶרֶץ פְּרִי, לְמַלְחָה; מִרְעֵת, יוֹשְׁבֵי בָהּ.	41:17
לה יֵשׁם מִדְבָּר, לְאֲגַם־מַיִם; וְאֶרֶץ צִיָּה, לְמִצְאֵי מַיִם... מא וַיִּשְׁגַּב אֲבִיוֹן מַעוֹנִי; וַיִּשָּׂם כְּצֶאֱנָן, מִשְׁפָּחוֹת.	43:10 41:20
מב יִרְאוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׂמְחוּ; וְכִלְעוּלָה, קִפְצָה פִּיהָ.	
מג מִי־חֲכָם וַיִּשְׁמַר־אֱלֹהֵי; וַיִּתְּבוּנָנוּ, חֲסָדֵי יְהוָה.	

Once again, we see how the *navi* cleverly chooses his words, in order that *Am Yisrael* in exile will understand the thematic link between *Tehillim* chapter 107 and his prophetic message.

In *Tehillim* 107, the Psalmist calls upon those who were saved from perilous situations in exile (in four very specific examples) to see the hand of God in their redemption, and then sing His appropriate praises.⁵¹ Furthermore, that psalm concludes with a call to perceive the hand of God behind historical events (see 107:43). Therefore, the theme of that psalm fits perfectly with God's call to *Am Yisrael* to recognize the hand of God in the forthcoming historical events, to prepare for return to the Land of Israel, and upon their return, to remember its purpose – to serve God by keeping his Torah, and thus becoming a "light to the nations."

Based on this interpretation, we can also arrive at a deeper understanding of the purpose of *nevuah*. The prophet's primary objective is not to *predict* Jewish history; rather, his goal is to *shape* that history. Redemption *can* happen, and God is orchestrating historical events to enable its success. However, redemption can only be complete if *Am Yisrael* are willing and ready to become God's loyal servant.

⁵¹. The famous laws of *birkat ha-gomel* are deduced from this chapter. See *Massekhet Berakhot* 54b.

For hundreds, if not thousands, of years this *haftarah* has been chanted on *Shabbat Bereishit* in every Jewish community, instilling hopes of redemption during the most difficult times of our exile. In our own generation, as the process of redemption has already begun, its message is as meaningful, if not more, than it was in the time of Yeshayahu himself.