



PROBING

THE PROPHETS

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The two p'rakim from which this week's haftarah is taken, chapters 51 and 52 of Sefer Yishayahu, continue the overarching theme of consolation that fills the final 27 chapters of the book. Clearly, the very opening words of the haftarah sound a clarion call of comfort to the nation, as Hashem declares: "Anochi, Anochi –Hu Menachemchem", "It is I, It is I, Who comforts you!" Could there be a more powerful assurance to the people that they would soon be consoled? Is this not the perfect message to reassure Israel that a better future awaits them? It certainly seems so... but, perhaps, it is not.

A glance at the original text reveals that this divine cry to Israel is actually NOT the beginning of Hashem's message – indeed, it is the 12th pasuk of the perek, NOT the first. The Malbim reminds us that some three verses earlier it is the not-yet-consoled nation who cried out to G-d: "Uri, Uri, livshi oz..." – "Awaken, Awaken and don Your strength [Hashem]", "Uri kiymei kedem" – "Awaken as in the past!" The Malbim clarifies the complaints of the people by explaining:

This is an argument Israel has with G-d. Realizing that Hashem's salvation had not yet come for them, the nation contends that since G-d had performed many miracles for past generations, although they too were not deserving, why won't He do so for them now??

The introductory statement of our

haftarah is G-d's response to the complaint. In effect, Hashem was challenging Israel with His words: "Do you think I'm no longer capable of saving you?" He asks, "Do you believe that I have changed from what I once was?" He challenges them. "Anochi, Anochi Hu Menachemchem!" – I am the SAME "I" that I always was. I did not change because I DO not change! In effect, the Malbim contends, G-d is challenging Israel to realize that it is not HE who has changed at all...but it is THEY who have!! And, therefore, it is they who must return to what they once were.

As the Malbim sees it, the continuation of that pasuk underscores this explanation: "Mi aht..." "Who are you (Israel)" "vatir'i..." "that you fear mortal man?" G-d complains that He no longer recognizes His chosen nation. Israel of today, he argues, is NOT like Israel of the past - the nation that He took out of Egypt. That past generation feared no mortal, relying upon Hashem alone for their salvation, something you fail to do. And that is why G-d continues in the very next verse to explain why their generation had not yet been saved: "Vatishkach Hashem Osecha..." Hashem tells them that they had forgotten that G-d is their Creator, who formed the entire universe, and that is why they are terrified all day long, each day, from your oppressor.

The Malbim does not see Yishayahu's prophecy as one of complete comfort and solace. That begins only in pasuk 17

with Hashem's cry to the nation to arise because they have already drunk G-d's "cup of wrath." Before that, the people are being taught that salvation, and with that, comfort, must arrive with a change in their conduct and faith system. Hashem CAN do it all but Hashem will NOT do it all.

In conclusion, it would appear that the Malbim expects Israel to take the first step in returning to G-d before they would realize Yishayahu's prophecy of G-d's return to them. And, if so, he sees in the prophet's challenging/comforting message a forerunner of the words spoken by the last of the prophets, Malachi, who shares Hashem's words with the people (Sefer Malachi: 3;7):

Shuvu Eilai, v'Ashuva Aleichem" –
"return to Me...and I shall return to you!" ■