



PROBING THE PROPHETS

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Punishment is not Rejection

The tragic words that open this week's haftarah ("Vatomer Tziyon 'azavani Hashem, Vashem shechechani") reflect the hopelessness of post-exile Israel who exclaim that G-d had abandoned and forgotten her. But these words also reflect the belief, held by many in the nation, that the exile and the destruction of the Temple meant that they need no longer worship the One G-d. Having been overwhelmed by the Babylonian military and having seen the enemy destroy Hashem's "house," convinced many that they must now worship the Babylonian "god" who, clearly, they believed, proved his power to be greater than that of Hashem (r"l).

This unfortunate attitude, one that spread within the suffering generation, should not surprise us. We find it repeated numerous times over succeeding eras, and bemoaned by different prophets. After the destruction of Yerushalayim and the Churban of the Beit HaMikdash, Yirmiyahu HaNavi authors the Sefer M'lachim as a response to this very

attitude:

The Jewish population had witnessed the victory of Babylonia over the Southern Kingdom of Israel and saw it as proof of the "failure" [ch"v'sh] of Hashem's ability to protect His nation. But they never accepted it as their own shortcoming, as a result of ignoring the decades of warnings issued by numerous prophets. For this reason, Yirmiyahu detailed in Sefer M'lachim the growing sinfulness of the people and the recurring refusal of Israel to repent so that the people would realize that it was **their defeat** - NOT Hashem's. The tragedy that befell them was due to their corruption and immorality; and their refusal to heed G-d's warnings.

Likewise, we find this argument (that Israel should now turn to others "gods") openly disputed in the words of Yechezkel who clearly warned the exiled Judeans (chapter 20; 32): "And that which you believe will not be, when you say: 'We will be like other nations and worship (gods of) wood and stone' "

However, Yishayahu's responds to these false ideas differently from both Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel. In this week's haftarah we hear the prophet turn to Israel in a soothing tone and comforting words. He explains that, as a mother could never forget her baby or fail to be compassionate to it, so true it is that G-d could never forget His nation or fail to be merciful to them. The navi reasserts that

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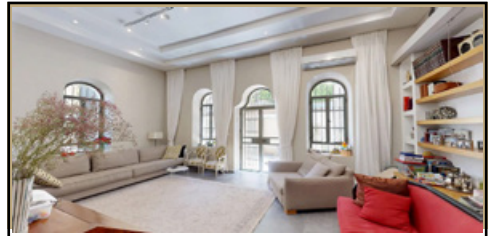
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Israel is eternally bound to G-d through the covenant made to their ancestors and, sin though they might, they remain chosen by G-d. To put it simply, Yishayahu reminds them that **punishment** does not mean **rejection**.

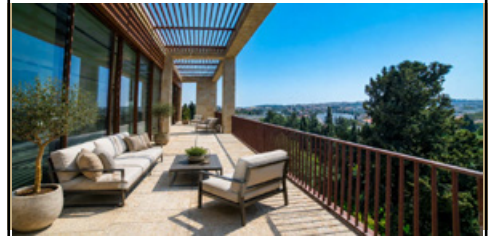
The navi supports his comforting words with a prophecy of a massive return to Israel, of a repopulating of the now-barren cities and of the rebuilding of destroyed edifices. He additionally promises that other nations will lend their support to Israel's return and, as a result, joy and gladness will return to the grieving land that will be filled with joyful music and prayers of thanksgiving.

It is, is it not, a vision that we see with our own eyes today. ■

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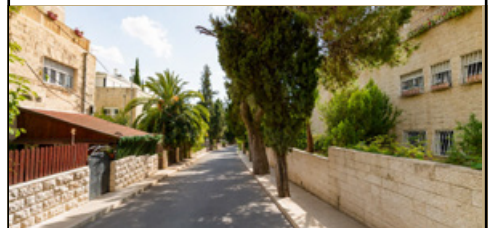
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