

Haftarah

'I have chosen you...not rejected you'



*But all who trust in the Eternal
renew their strength,
they soar on wings like eagles,
they run and never grow weary,
they march and never grow faint.*
Isaiah 40:31

*I have taken you from the ends of
the earth, and called you from its
far corners, and said to you: You
are My servant, I have chosen you,
and not rejected you.*
Isaiah 41:9

Connection

- In the Jewish calendar, this haftarah reading (Isaiah 40:27—41:16) accompanies the Torah portion *Lekh Lekha*: Genesis 12:1-17:27.
- The prophet Isaiah compares Israel to Abraham. Just as God called one man for a special service, so does God choose Israel from all the nations of the earth. Like Abraham, Israel's fidelity to God will be rewarded.

Background

- The prophet speaks from the context of his people's captivity in Babylon. His message of hope and comfort to the people of Israel coincides with the historical emergence of King Cyrus of Persia as a major player in the politics of the region.
- Note: in the tradition, 'a champion from the east' (Isa. 41:2) is understood to refer to Cyrus, and also to Abraham (who comes from Ur in the East before embarking on his journey to the land of Canaan).
- Cyrus the Great reigned from 559 to 529 BCE. He was known not only for his conquests but for his respect for the peoples of the conquered lands, allowing them relative freedom to pursue their own traditions.
- With Cyrus' defeat of Babylon the Jews were permitted to return to their homeland and Cyrus earned an honoured place in Jewish history.

Themes

Israel, your God has not forgotten you! Help is on its way.

- Take heart! Although you grow tired, God '*never grows faint*' (40:28).
- God is 'First' and 'Last' (41:4). Idol-making is useless (41:7).
- Your God will triumph; your oppressors '*shall fade and disappear*' (41:11).
- These saving acts will lead you to praise the Lord '*and glory in the Holy One of Israel*' (41:16).

Reflection

- '*Listen in silence*' (41:1). From the root of the Hebrew verb comes the word for 'deaf'. Thus the overtone, 'Be like one who can neither hear nor speak.' Ponder this. What kind of listening is implied?
- '*My way is hidden*' (40:27). How often do we feel disappointed and frustrated by the apparent absence of God during times of distress? And even if we can personally accommodate this absence, how painful it is to have to explain it to a child who sincerely prays only to find that 'God doesn't answer me.' Put another way, it is as if our own needs are hidden from God's sight. The bible speaks eloquently of this dilemma, as prophets and psalmists alike wonder aloud: *Lord, how long will you hide your face?* In light of today's haftarah, share your thoughts on the 'hidden God'.

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996).