

Parashat Ki Teitzei August 22, 2026 - Peretz Wolf-Prusan

Haftarah: Isaiah 54:1-10 | Fifth Haftarah of Consolation

Let's return to the final years of the Babylonian exile, roughly around 550–539 B.C.E. A poem is written that eventually finds itself in a collection that will be called "Second Isaiah." Fifteen chapters focusing on being lost and found, alienation and attachment, by Cohanim and seforim, priests and scribes, encouraging the return to the Land of Israel, all thanks to Cyrus the Great of Persia. I have been reconstructing my own understanding of this time period. But that is another story.

I am focusing on our Haftarah: Isaiah 54:1-10. The poet riffs on Genesis 28:14:

You shall spread toward the sea (west), and forward (east), and to the north, and toward the Negev (south).

Here is a portion of today's Haftarah, from the Robert Alter translation:

For to the north and the south you shall burst forth,
and your seed shall take hold of nations
and shall settle desolate towns.

Do not fear, for you shall not be shamed,
and you shall not be disgraced, for you shall not be dishonored.

For the shame of your youth you shall forget,
and the dishonor of your widowhood you shall no longer recall.

For he who takes you to bed is your Maker,
the LORD of Armies is His name,
and your redeemer is Israel's Holy One,

God of all the earth He is called.

"In a brief moment I forsook you (ok, it was 50 years)
but with great compassion will I gather you in.

In surge of fury I hid My face from you,
but with everlasting kindness I have compassion for you,"
said your redeemer, the LORD.

"For as Noah's waters is this to Me,
as I vowed not to let Noah's waters go over the earth again,
so have I vowed

not to be furious with you nor to rebuke you.

For though the mountains move
and the hills totter,
My kindness shall not move from you
nor My pact of peace totter,
said He Who has compassion for you, the LORD.

What a country western love song!

“Baby, come back. You crashed my pickup, sank, my boat, lost my dog and were rude to my mom. I got mad and tossed you out. All is forgiven.”

And a few, not all, packed up their Babylonian creations, Torah and an improved alef-bet, now called Hebrew, and went to the Land of Israel. Even those who remained found solace in it.

This is the fifth seven of seven Haftorot (Shiva D'nechemta) of consolation after Tisha B'Av.

When you use all the opening lines of each of all seven Haftorot you find another poem. It's the opposite of a nonsense poem, a jabberwocky, it's a cento, a found poem, Latin word for a "patchwork garment." This time a dialogue between us and God.

"Comfort, O comfort My people," says Your God.

Yet Zion says, "The Lord has forsaken me!"

Afflicted, storm-tossed woman, uncomforted,

I am about to lay your stones with turquoise,

Sing gladly, O barren one who has not given birth

Rise, O shine, for your light has come!

I shall greatly rejoice in the Lord.

This dialogue is a conversation across time. This is the season of the Lew, Rabbi Alan Lew, d. 2009. This season is when we read and re-read, "This Is Real and You Are Totally Unprepared."

Here is my favorite poem of his for this time:

The rabbis of the Talmud called prayer *tsha'akah* or screaming. All Israel was screaming when we got off the plane.

The *cheroot* drivers were having a frightening argument.

They were fighting over the distribution of their passengers.

"If I have to take this one to Har Nof and this one to Ein Kerem and this one to the Dan Panorama," one of them said, "I'll be scattered all over the city like a tossed salad."

"Why **not** you?" said another. "Why should it be me who is torn from Beit Shemesh to Jericho, the sun to the moon, with the city of peace in between?"

"Fine," the first one said. "If you go to the left, I'll go right. If you go north, I'll go south," then he stomped off to load his van.

This was the driver of our *sheroot*. Now he was rearranging the passengers according to weight. There were three large women on the van.

"One of you will have to sit up front," he said, but they were all three indignant and none of them would budge.

After a quiet ride to Jerusalem, he dropped two of them off at a Yeshiva for women in Har Nof, then he drove on to Machane Yehudah. The narrow streets were swollen and the going was slow.

"Can I drop you here," he said to an elderly woman with a Spanish accent.

"No! I live on the next street and I can't carry my suitcases all that way."

Now the driver was very unhappy.

"The street between here and there is even narrower than this one and it's all clogged up," but the woman insisted.

On the next street, the driver asked her which house was hers.

He had to ask several times.

"Don't shout at me," the woman said.

"I wasn't shouting," the driver shouted, "I simply asked you which corner you lived on four times and you never answered me, so I had to raise my voice a little each time."

Outside the sun was setting, the city, a burning coal, everyone screaming, the prayers of all Israel were swelling, winding up the twisted paths of the heart.

Please God, they said, don't tear me apart, don't pull me in too many directions at once,
and listen to me.

Don't let me go unheard.

Don't let my questions go unanswered so that I have to repeat them four times, and if I
raise my voice remember I am only praying.

And please God, take me all the way home. Don't leave me alone on some distant
corner with more than I can carry.

Today is August the 22nd. When asked to give a drash on August 22 I got so excited. I
misremembered when Yehudah Amichai died. I thought it was today. OK, he passed
on September 22, 2000, but no matter.

God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children, from The Selected Poetry of Yehuda
Amichai, edited and translated from the Hebrew by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell.

God has pity on kindergarten children,

He pities school children — less.

But adults he pities not at all.

He abandons them,

And sometimes they have to crawl on all fours
In the scorching sand
To reach the dressing station,
Streaming with blood.

But perhaps
He will have pity on those who love truly
And take care of them
And shade them
Like a tree over the sleeper on the public bench.

Perhaps even we will spend on them
Our last pennies of kindness
Inherited from mother,

**So that their own happiness will protect us
Now and on other days.**

In this conversation across time and place, there's the eternal longing.

Longing, if that's all one does and does not lead to action, is passive.

Looking back to Tisha B'Av, so too is lamenting. We sat here Erev Tisha B'Av and heard lamentations. It was eerily beautiful. But it is only moving if we move.

One day I will recite lamentations over October 7, but not until there is a full accounting of how this happened.

One day I will recite lamentations of the deaths of so many children in Gaza, but not while there is so much to be done to save the children.

One day I will recite lamentations for all the damage our country is doing to itself and the world, but not while there is an opportunity to forge a renewal of American Humanitarianism.

One day I will recite lamentations over my many errors, but not while I have the strength to correct them.

From the next morning, a fast day, to Yom Kippur, the bookend fast, the time between Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur is the great seven-week time of turning and doing, of rebuilding. From destruction to reconstruction. A sacred movement.

A final Elul cento, a patchwork quilt poem:

Don't be furious with us

Don't leave us with more than we can carry.

Take care of us and shade us.

That being said, let's get on with the rebuilding. There's work to do.

Shabbat Shalom