

Isaiah 40:3-8 –Is this really a divine process?

Lesson Goals:

1. To appreciate that prophecies can be fulfilled in wholly-unpredictable ways and that it is often not easy to determine whether a given event is the one envisioned;
2. To appreciate how God can use human agents to fulfill His agenda in ways that humans don't expect
3. To develop skills in unpacking the argument in a prophetic passage, arguments that relate to political realities.

Frontal Teaching

Begin by presenting the clash of expectations and reality surrounding Cyrus' declaration, focusing on the points detailed in slide 2. In this lesson, the real question will be: Is the return of 538 a divine event or a human event? The teacher should therefore focus on this question, at some length.

Ask students: Pretend that you're one of the Jews who has decided to join the return, for whatever reason (perhaps you have some position in Cyrus' administration that makes it financially worthwhile to return to Israel). What would make you believe that this IS a divinely-sponsored event?

Elicit responses, and then ask: Well, what if God comes along on the way.

Then show slide 3 (verse 3) and ask students to parse the verse using Te'amim. – Highlight that this verse does not say "A voice calling in the wilderness" (cf John) but rather "A voice calls: In the wilderness...."

Ask students :

- what words the voice calls (circle these)
- match parallel words (use this to explain tough words like arava and Mesilla)
- where the road is going from and where it is going to?
- Most importantly, for whom is this road?

It appears that it is a road for God, but who is travelling on it. Students should appreciate that though this is a road for God, the returnees are the ones travelling on it. The prophet is here suggesting that the process is run by God, even though the apparent participants are humans.

The idea that the apparent participants are humans becomes clear in v. 4 , which I also suggest teaching frontally, using slide 4. Use the word bank, and then ask students to draw a picture of the activity described (something like a bulldozer flattening a road should come to mind, and you can use slide 5 to illustrate this). For whom is this – for people or for God? Obviously, it's people who are travelling on the road. God doesn't need a flat road.

Summarize: This is a road for people, but the prophet is calling it a "road for God" to emphasize that God is behind the process.

Students may challenge: But it doesn't LOOK like God is behind the process. Tell students that question is addressed in the worksheet.

Assign Worksheet – page 1.

Review worksheet – page 1

Then, ask students the question noted in slide 6: How does God show his agreement in Isa 40:5 – based on the worksheet, students should realize that the return of Kevod Hashem to Temple is the final step in the redemption, in Ezekiel's vision.

But when Yeshaya speaks of the return of Kevod Hashem, he does not connect it to the Temple. The people are expecting a return to the Bet Ha Mikdash, but no such return ensues. How does Yeshaya explain this?

There are several possibilities. One is the Radak's view, noted in slide 6, that at some future time, Kevod Hashem will be evident.

Slide 7 explains how the Radak's view relates to the pesukim. Verse 5 is in future (as slide 8 explains) whereas most of the other verses are in the imperative.

But there is another possibility – that there are different types of "appearance of Kevod Hashem" – sometimes Kevod Hashem appears not in the Bet Ha mikdash, but in normal historical events. Ask the question pointed out in slide 8: "Do the people see Kevod Hashem in the return, and why?" Students will probably appreciate that Kevod Hashem is a multi-valent term, which does not have to mean a visual appearance in the Temple. You can refer to Numbers 14:22, where it refers to God's wondrous deeds in Egypt. Any wondrous deed of God can be Kevod Hashem. Yeshaya may be suggesting (and I think he is) that the Jews should not be expecting Kevod Hashem to look like the vision of Yehezkel. A divine act in history might also be Kevod Hashem. This issue is explored further in vv. 10-11. For now, it suffices to raise and explore the question.

Students may ask: this is all theoretical. How can you prove that this is a divine process? Is it worthwhile to participate?

Or teacher can ask:

If you're living in Bavel in this time, would you participate? Use slide 9 for this purpose.

The question : "is this a divine process?" will come up – Reverse the question, and ask: Why does it matter if it's a divine process?

Students will offer various answers, but highlight the point that a divine process is worthwhile and lasting. The issue of "lasting" will be important in a moment.

Give students the question: "Would you want to dedicate yourself to something that is not lasting?"

Then note that this question is explored in page 2 of the worksheet.

Assign Worksheet – page 2, -

When students are finished the worksheet, they should read the passage from *The Little Prince* which distinguishes between eternal and ephemeral.

Ephemeral things are beautiful, but it can be risky to invest all of one's life and energy in them, because they are...

Review worksheet – page 2

In reviewing the worksheet, show slide 10 to contrast eternal to ephemeral.

Then, demonstrate the underlying argument by using the implied conversation between the prophet and the people in the second part of the slide.

Explore the idea of people being unwilling to participate in a process unless they know for sure that it is lasting.

Students will protest: But how do we know that this is REALLY a lasting process.

This issue is addressed in the next lesson, which will conclude the unit.