

Isaiah 40:9-11 – THE ARRIVAL OF GOD

Lesson Goals:

This is fundamentally a continuation of the 40:3-8 lesson, and so the goals are similar

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 appreciate that even when God does so, the process remains a Divinely-driven process.

Frontal Teaching – verse 9

Since verse 9 is particularly dramatic, I suggest beginning the class with a bit of shock theatre by running in and yelling “God is coming!!!” or something similar.

Then tell students to open to 40:9, and putting slide 2 on the board, ask one student to act out the verse.

Students should clearly understand that the Mevasseret is speaking to the towns of Judah, NOT to Jerusalem. To where is God returning? (This is critical.) Is He returning to the Temple?

Why is God returning to the towns of Judah? Let students remain confused about this point for a few minutes.

Frontal Teaching – verse 10

Since these verses are full of “hinneh,” I recommend teaching them frontally, making each student responsible for a different “hinneh.”

The slides should help.

In the first part of v. 10, illustrated in slide 3, students need to realize that God is described as a warrior coming with power. This is a fairly simple concept, and you can compare this to Exod. 15:4, which is on the slide.

Ask students – but wait – Is God battling anyone? Is He defeating anyone in these verses?

Then, show slide 4 – it is a piece of the Lachish reliefs showing Sennacherib accepting the surrender of prisoners from Lachish. Ask – what is the king doing here? (Do not focus too much on this slide, since it shows the Jews being subjugated.) But it does show that a warrior not only fights, but also takes rewards.

The rewards are discussed in slide 5, which is the second part of verse 5. Here, the students need to understand that sachar and pe'ula mean the same, as in Vayikra 19:3. Most Mefarshim (Rashi, Radak) understand 'secharo" and "peulato" here as "the reward of the Jews." But R. Eliezer of Beaugency understands this as referring to the sachar of God, i.e. the Jews who are returning, and I think his explanation is best in context.

The reward here seems to be the captives who are driven in front of the warrior, and who constitute his reward for his military victories.

Explain this, and ask students to draw a picture of the scene to ensure that they understand it – when they have done this, ask them what part of the picture they expect to see, and what part is invisible.

The key point students should get is that while the sachar (the Jews) is visible, as they return to the land of Israel from Babylon, God, who is the warrior driving the prisoners, is invisible.

Then, ask the Mevasseret of Jerusalem to describe what she sees --- she sees only the "sachar" (the Jews) but not the warrior (God). Why then, did she announce the return of God?

Ask students this question, and students should begin to understand that God, while invisible, is accompanying the returnees.

Frontal Teaching – verse 11

Then turn to verse 11, and use slides 6 and 7 to unpack the idea of God compared to a shepherd carrying the sheep in front of Him, and pushing them to return. The dual image of God as caring shepherd and as strong warrior might be used to show different treatments given to different groups of Jews: those who need more care get carried; those who need less care can walk (implied in R. Eliezer). Or it might simply indicate two aspects of God's relationship to the Jews.

It is critical that students understand slide 8, which is based on R. Eliezer of Beaugency's perush – he states explicitly that vv. 10 and 11 explicate v. 9. The mevasseret sees the returning Jews, and understands from this that God is behind the return.

You may wish to assign this question as a short in-class assignment, in which the students can answer in pictures.

Ensure that the students understand how the prophet develops the idea that God is the invisible hand behind the return.

Worksheet

The purpose of the worksheet is to allow students to reflect on the overall message of vv. 3-11 and to understand how these verses tie together in one coherent message.

I therefore suggest reviewing the worksheet with the whole class, after students have completed it.

Key points include, question by question:

1. The invisible hand of God is behind the acts of return. The announcer sees the returnees and interprets this as the arrival of God.
2. It's clearly a divine process, according to vv. 9-11.
3. It's therefore a lasting and non-ephemeral process, using the distinction in vv. 6-8. (Students will object: But there was a second exile! Answer: The reality of the second return means that the process of return is eternal. Even if the Jews are exiled again, the existence of a single return means that a future return can happen and that the connection to the land can never be severed.
4. The return itself is an illustration of the revelation of Kevod Hashem. There is a possible revelation of Kevod Hashem besides the return to the Temple.

In order to ensure that students understand these points, I suggest reviewing, in order vv. 5, 6-8, and 9-11, using slides 9, 10, and 11 respectively.

Exit activity

Since the intellectual content of this chapter is complex, I strongly suggest assigning an essay to conclude this chapter, on the topic:

“What challenges does Yeshaya face in convincing Jews that it's worth returning to Israel?

What arguments does he provide for the value of returning in chapter 40, vv 1-11?”