

everlasting covenant with you, *according to* the faithful mercies shown to David” (Isaiah 55:1-3).

There is further affirming comfort, knowing that eventually, even unknown nations will ultimately come to Israel recognizing its unique position with the Creator:

“Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, and a nation which knows you not will run to you, because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel; for He has glorified you” (Isaiah 55:4-5).

As we contemplate these comforting words of Isaiah this week, we need to always be reminded that there are usurpers wielding verbal weapons in the midst of God’s people today, just as they were present in Ancient Israel. They will not prosper, but they can do some serious damage as they are used to test the hearts and minds of who will be loyal to Him.

Let us be a people who do not fail the tests of the Great Comforter!

## *Haftarah Shoftim* “Rear Guard Comforter”

Isaiah 51:12-52:12 (or finish at 53:12)

Our Torah reading for this week, *Shoftim* (Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9), deals initially with the selection of judges and officials to rule over the people of Israel, as they prepared to enter into the Promised Land.<sup>5</sup> Selecting individuals with proper qualifications, not subject to bribes, intimidation, or prejudiced in their judgment, is critical for proper governance.<sup>6</sup> *Shoftim* also mentions the requirements for Israel’s future kings.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the reference to a future prophet like Moses—which causes us to think immediately about Messiah Yeshua—of whom the Lord will hold everyone accountable, cannot be overlooked:

“I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require *it* of him” (Deuteronomy 18:18-19).

These criteria for governance are all powerful descriptions of how order is to be maintained among God’s people. And yet, as students of the Torah digest these descriptions about contemporary and future leadership, our Haftarah selection is

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 16:18-20.

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 17:6-13.

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 17:14-20.

another compelling passage from Isaiah—reminding us that it is the Holy One of Israel, rather than selected human leaders, who comforts His people. The opening verses contrast the frailty of man with the majesty of God:

“I, even I, am He who comforts you. Who are you that you are afraid of man who dies and of the son of man who is made like grass, that you have forgotten the LORD your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, that you fear continually all day long because of the fury of the oppressor, as he makes ready to destroy? But where is the fury of the oppressor? The exile will soon be set free, and will not die in the dungeon, nor will his bread be lacking. For I am the LORD your God, who stirs up the sea and its waves roar (the LORD of hosts is His name). I have put My words in your mouth and have covered you with the shadow of My hand, to establish the heavens, to found the earth, and to say to Zion, ‘You are My people’” (Isaiah 51:12-16).

After speaking on just how powerful the Lord is, the Prophet Isaiah went on to speak to some of the realities of a people who will be judged by some tormentors. But once again, the rhetorical question, “How shall I comfort you?” reminded Israel that it had an awesome advocate in the Lord. In His timing, He will put the chalice of His anger in the very hand of Israel’s tormentors, and make them pay for their inflicting pain upon His people:

“Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself! Arise, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the LORD's hand the cup of His anger; the chalice of reeling you have drained to the dregs. There is none to guide her among all the sons she has borne, nor is there one to take her by the hand among all the sons she has reared. These two things have befallen you; who will mourn for you? The devastation and destruction, famine and sword; How shall I comfort you? Your sons have fainted, they lie *helpless* at the head of every street, like an antelope in a net, full of the wrath of the LORD, the rebuke of your God. Therefore, please hear this, you afflicted, who are drunk, but not with wine: Thus says your Lord, the LORD, even your God who contends for His people, ‘Behold, I have taken out of your hand the cup of reeling, the chalice of My anger; you will never drink it again. I will put it into the hand of your tormentors, who have said to you, “Lie down that we may walk over *you*.” You have even made your back like the ground and like the street for those who walk over *it*’” (Isaiah 51:17-23).

The Holy One, through Isaiah, began to exhort His people to awake from their slumber and stand up to those who were oppressing them. A little historical recollection is in order, but ultimately it is the Almighty who will rise up and speak the comforting words that “Here I am,” *hineini*:

“Awake, awake, clothe yourself in your strength, O Zion; clothe yourself in your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for the uncircumcised and the unclean will no longer come into you. Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; loose yourself from the chains around your neck, O captive daughter of Zion. For thus says the LORD, ‘You were sold for nothing and you will be redeemed without money.’ For thus says the Lord GOD, ‘My people went down

at the first into Egypt to reside there; then the Assyrian oppressed them without cause. Now therefore, what do I have here,' declares the LORD, 'seeing that My people have been taken away without cause?' *Again* the LORD declares, 'Those who rule over them howl, and My name is continually blasphemed all day long. Therefore My people shall know My name; therefore in that day I am the one who is speaking, "Here I am"' (Isaiah 52:1-6).

Isaiah now shifted to the future and described the wonderful task of taking the good news of salvation from Mount Zion to the world. At some point in the future, people will shout "Your God reigns!" and recognize that the Lord has continued to comfort His people even through trying times. *This testimony will be undeniable throughout the world.* Finally, there is a great reminder that the Lord will not only go before His people, but He will protect them and be their rear guard from those who might try to harm them:

"How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and says to Zion, 'Your God reigns!' Listen! Your watchmen lift up *their* voices, they shout joyfully together; for they will see with their own eyes when the LORD restores Zion. Break forth, shout joyfully together, you waste places of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem. **The LORD has bared His holy arm in the sight of all the nations, that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God.** Depart, depart, go out from there, touch nothing unclean; go out of the midst of her, purify yourselves, you who carry the vessels of the LORD. But you will not go out in haste, nor will you go as fugitives; for the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel *will be your rear guard*" (Isaiah 52:7-12).

When Isaiah reminds us of the rear guard protection of the Lord, the thought of the Amalekites' methods for attacking the weak and weary, at the rear of the Israelites' wilderness march might come to mind. Amalek was noted for not fearing God and taking advantage of the stragglers:

"Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God. Therefore it shall come about when the LORD your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies, in the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget" (Deuteronomy 25:17-19).

Today, we need to be reminded that the weak and weary in the faith will always be with us. In fact, as our Torah portion relates, there are certain exemptions in Deuteronomy 20 that allow the fearful to avoid the rigors of warfare. The Holy One requires a fighting force that is not weakened by the fainthearted who are not fully committed to the battles of life:

“The officers also shall speak to the people, saying, ‘Who is the man that has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would dedicate it. Who is the man that has planted a vineyard and has not begun to use its fruit? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would begin to use its fruit. And who is the man that is engaged to a woman and has not married her? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would marry her.’ Then the officers shall speak further to the people and say, **‘Who is the man that is afraid and fainthearted? Let him depart and return to his house, so that he might not make his brothers’ hearts melt like his heart’**” (Deuteronomy 20:5-8).

We also need to remember that the forces of Amalek have never been totally defeated. The spirit of Amalek is still around seeking to rob, steal, and destroy the weak and susceptible, and we are always in great need of the Holy One to be our rear guard. But as Isaiah reminds us, the God of Israel will always go before us to fight the spiritual battles that will persist until Yeshua returns.

We can take great comfort that our Protector, Deliverer, Fortress, and Shield was, is, and will continue to be the One in whom we trust! However, it is still incumbent upon God’s people to arouse themselves, awake themselves, shake off the dust from their feet, and enter into the spiritual battles of life. While the Lord continues to promise to comfort His people, we are still going to be held accountable for our actions, as we battle with those who oppose the will of the Almighty.

May we take comfort in the ultimate outcome, but *always* be girded for the daily skirmishes.

## *Haftarah Ki-Teitzei* “Restoration Guarantee”

Isaiah 54:1-10 (or finish at 52:13)

Our Torah reading for this week, *Ki-Teitzei* (Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19), focuses on a series of miscellaneous laws that are proscribed to bring an additional level of civility to the people of Israel. The object of these commandments is to “sweep out evil from your midst” (Deuteronomy 21:21, NJPS; cf. 22:21,22,24). Areas of clarification include family laws,<sup>8</sup> hanging corpses,<sup>9</sup> sundry laws between

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 21:10-22.

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 21:23.