

Would Our Mother Forget Us?

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This Shabbat is the second of the seven Shabbatot of consolation that follow Tishah Be'av, and, as on all these Shabbatot, its haftarah comes from the last part of the book of Isaiah. These are highly appropriate passages to console us after we commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem, because they were written by a prophet who lived in exile roughly a generation after the Babylonian empire demolished the Jerusalem Temple, destroyed the Judean state, and exiled much of its population. Because the name of this prophet is unknown, scholars refer to him (or perhaps her; women served as prophets in ancient Israel, as the examples of Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah show) as Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah.

Deutero-Isaiah anticipated the victory of the Persian emperor, Cyrus, over the Babylonian empire and predicted that the Persians would allow the Judean exiles to return to their homeland and to rebuild their Temple there. Addressed to a despondent people who have experienced a catastrophe, this prophet's poetic orations attempt to convince the Judeans that the God of Israel is still powerful and still loyal to the people Israel.

Unusually among biblical texts, Deutero-Isaiah refers to God using not only masculine metaphors but feminine ones as well (e.g., Isa. 42:13–14, 45:10, 49:14–15, 66:13). The reasons behind this innovation cannot be known with certainty. Perhaps the prophet's intense monotheism requires the prophet to show explicitly that Hashem has characteristics that polytheists associate with goddesses as well those associated with gods. At the same time, the feminine imagery, and especially maternal language, Deutero-Isaiah uses for God suit this prophet's focus on solace and hope, and the opening lines of today's haftarah are a banner example. They also display this prophet's frequent practice of borrowing language and images from earlier biblical texts and recasting them to comfort the exiled Judeans. Let's take a closer look.

In the opening lines of the haftarah, the prophet portrays Jerusalem as a woman who thinks that her husband has left her and that her children are gone forever. Zion (i.e., Jerusalem) serves as a stand-in for the Jewish people, who believe either that the God of Israel no longer loves them (i.e., has ended the covenant) or that the Israel's deity is one of many gods, and has been defeated—or even killed—by the god of Babylon. Further, because the nation is in exile, the prophet portrays Zion not only as a rejected or widowed wife but also as a bereaved mother: her children have been taken away forever, destined to live in Babylon and probably to assimilate into the population there, thus ending the Jewish people's existence. Zion laments in the first verse:

Hashem has abandoned me,
And my Lord has forgotten me. ([Isa. 49:14](#))

But the prophet quotes God as forcefully denying this:

Would a woman forget her infant,
Forget to love the child of her womb?
Even if they would forget,
I never forget you . . .
Your children come quickly . . .
Lift up your eyes and see—
All of them have gathered, they're coming towards you!
I am making a vow (an utterance of Hashem):
Truly, you will wear all of them like jewelry,
You will adorn yourself with them as a bride. ([49:15–18](#))

Zion's question in verse 14 uses a marital metaphor to describe the covenant: God is the husband and Zion or Israel is the wife. The same metaphor was used by the prophet Jeremiah shortly before the exile began, quoting God:

Why do My people say,
“We're leaving You! We're not coming home anymore!”
Would a young woman forget her jewelry,
A bride her ornaments?

But My people has forgotten Me

Days beyond number. ([Jer. 2:31–32](#))

In our haftarah, Deutero-Isaiah takes up language from Jeremiah's prophecy of rebuke but uses it in radically new ways. In Jeremiah, God asked, "Would a young woman forget her jewelry, a bride her adornment?" But in Deutero-Isaiah, God asks, "Would a woman forget her infant, forget to love the child of her womb?" Words found immediately thereafter in Jeremiah's question reappear several verses later in Deutero-Isaiah: כַּעֲדֵי ("like jewelry") in [Isaiah 49:18](#) recalls עֲדֵיהָ ("her jewelry") in Jeremiah. Deutero-Isaiah's phrase "You will adorn yourself with them as a bride" echoes Jeremiah's question: the later prophet's verb וּתְקַשְׂרִים recalls the earlier prophet's noun קְשׁוּרֵיהָ ("her adornments/ornaments"), and the word "bride" (כַּלָּה) appears next to the word for adornment in both texts.

By repeating vocabulary from Jeremiah's complaint, Deutero-Isaiah encourages us to read these passages alongside each other, making clear that in the later text, God denies abandoning the people, even though they forgot God in Jeremiah's day. Both texts include the metaphor of a woman, but in Deutero-Isaiah the figure is a more tender image: in place of a woman who covets jewelry, we read of mother and child. The jewelry does reappear but is no longer used critically. Instead, God promises Zion that she will have *children* with which to adorn herself—that is, that Jerusalem will again be inhabited by multitudes of Jews. The later prophet repeatedly uses words and images to comfort that the earlier one had used to castigate. Deutero-Isaiah reverses the message of the passage from Jeremiah—but never denies its accuracy (for simply by reminding the audience of Jeremiah's prophecy of doom, Deutero-Isaiah implicitly confirms that the exile Jeremiah long predicted has indeed come to pass.) For the later prophet, God reprimands but does not renounce Israel.

The most interesting change Deutero-Isaiah works on Jeremiah's language involves the metaphor each uses for God. In Jeremiah, the woman who is fickle and ungrateful is Israel, and God is her husband. But in today's haftarah, the woman is not a bride but a mother—and that mother is God. In fact, the persuasive force of the passage depends on the fact that God is portrayed here as Israel's mother rather than Israel's husband:

a husband can divorce a wife, but a mother remains a mother forever.

In rare cases mothers do abandon their children, but Deutero-Isaiah anticipates this objection and responds to it in a daring way: the prophet likens Hashem not merely to a mother, but to a mother who breast-feeds (עוֹל, which I translated above as "infant," refers specifically to an infant who is nursing; the noun is derived from a verb that means "to suckle"). A mother who is breast-feeding is physically unable to forget her child: if she does not express milk every few hours, her breasts become engorged and painful. God is physically connected to the Jewish people, the prophet insists, as a breast-feeding mother is connected to her infant. The people did forsake God. But God will never renounce Her child. Deutero-Isaiah provides reasons for God's loyalty unrelated to Israel's behavior—which are therefore more believable to a guilt-ridden exilic audience.

Deutero-Isaiah is a constantly *allusive* poet, borrowing language from older biblical texts and reworking it to provide a message of comfort and encouragement in place of the often negative predictions of prophets who came earlier. The allusion to [Jeremiah 2:31–32](#) we have examined is but one of roughly a dozen in today's haftarah that rework language from Jeremiah, Deuteronomy, First Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, and Psalms. In fact, all of this prophet's compositions ([Isaiah 35, 40–66](#)) display a very clever artistry of allusion and revision even as they constantly echo and reinforce older biblical traditions.

And this prophet is the one biblical author who repeatedly uses female metaphors to describe God (as well as masculine figures of speech). This prophet's work seems surprisingly contemporary in suggesting that God is as much a mother as a husband—which is to say that God is neither man nor woman, and that whatever language we apply to God is always figurative, never literal. In both these respects today's haftarah is a reminder of the literary sensitivity and theological depth we are privileged to experience on Shabbat morning.

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