



**Parsha B'reishit**  
**Isaiah 42:5-43:10 (A), 42:5-42:21 (S)**  
**September 27, 2013 / 23 Tishrei 5774**

The first haftarah of the cycle of Torah readings is from the prophet Isaiah, 42:5-43:10 (the S'fardic tradition ends at 42:21). It provides both a contrast and a complement to the opening verses of the Torah that speak of God as the creator of heaven and earth. Thus the haftarah also begins with God as creator, stating, "Thus said God the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and what it brings forth, Who gave breath to the people upon it..." (Isaiah 42:5).

Yet while the Torah speaks of the universal nature of creation without reference to any one people, the haftarah stands in stark contrast as it is concerned with God's special concern for the people Israel. It is this tension that forms the perfect complement to the opening verses of the Torah, as the God who created the heavens and the earth is the same God who is the guardian of the people of Israel.

The prophet is with the people in exile as they await repatriation from Babylonia. He reminds the people that they are God's chosen and that they are bound to God with a brit, a covenant. God will remain with them and will ultimately see to their repatriation to the land of Israel, as long as the people fulfill their part of the brit. This is shown through the most significant image utilized in the haftarah: bringing light where there is darkness. Thus the people are told that it is their duty to be a light unto the nations (I'ohr goyim, not as is often misquoted ohr lagoyim!).

How are the people to accomplish this? The end of the haftarah spells this out clearly. "My witnesses are you-declares the Lord!" (Isaiah 43:10). We are reminded in this first haftarah of the most important prayer in our liturgy, a verse which will not occur in the Torah until the last book, Deuteronomy. Of course I refer to the Sh'ma. In the Torah, the last letter of both the first and final words of this verse (sh'ma and echad) are larger than all the rest. The letters are ayin and dalet, and when put together form the word eyd, or witness. Thus the rabbis teach us that it is up to the Jewish people to bear witness to God's "oneness".

When we behave morally and ethically, following the instructions God gave to us in the Torah, then we truly serve as a witness to the goodness and kindness of God. When that happens the rest of the world begins to grasp the concept of one God for all peoples, the God of all creation. Isaiah reminds us that the creator of the heavens and earth is also the creator of the Jewish people, and when we are a light unto others, God's presence shines forth in the world.

*This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Steve Kane, who has been spiritual leader of Congregation Sons of Israel, Briarcliff Manor, NY since 1993.*