

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Matot (3 Weeks #1)

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 9: Parshat Matot , Jeremiah 1:1-2:3

*(This haftara is only read with Matot when Matot and Ma'asei are read separately. otherwise, this is read as the haftarah of Pinchas)*

Note that this week's *haftarah*, and the nine after it, are chosen for their connection to the themes of this season of the year—destruction and comfort—rather than the Torah readings with which they happen to coincide. That is why, for example, we are reading this *haftarah* for Pinchas when it is printed after Matot; it is in fact neither, but the *haftarah* for the first Shabbat of the Three Weeks between the fasts of the Seventeenth of Tammuz and of the Ninth of Av. I have, however, left them in the section of haftarot for weekly Torah readings because they are always read at this time of year; there is no other *haftarah* for these selections.

## **The Tragedy in Jeremiah's Predestination**

Jeremiah opens his book with the word “*divrei*, the words of,” which happens only a few times in Scripture. The Midrash says that it signals a text of “*divrei kinturin*, words of complaint and negativity.” From his first word, Jeremiah is cast in the role of a complainer, whose message focused on the Jewish people's negatives.

His lineage highlights the poignancy of that fact. Radak notes that his father was part of the group that found a Torah scroll in the Temple and read it to Josiah, sparking a time of intense repentance. Jeremiah got his first prophecy five years before that incident and continued way after. That Jeremiah was the son of such a man, and was already serving as a prophet when his father had that great success, heightens the pathos in the people's refusal to be moved to similar improvement by his words, that he instead had to watch them decline to the Destruction.

The tragic aspect of Jeremiah's life becomes clearer if we recall that God informed him that he had been created to be this prophet. There are more minimal ways to read this, such as Radak's view that it only means he was given the intellect and imagination necessary for prophecy, but the text seems to suggest that God is saying that Jeremiah's life was more predetermined than most of ours.

## **Asking a Boy to Perform a Man's Job**

Sifrei notes parallels between Jeremiah and Moses's careers: both prophesied for 40 years and both rebuked the Jews for their failings. The idea that Jeremiah in some way is being given a task akin to Moses' heightens our understanding of his protests of his youth. Moses started his career at eighty, and even then only fully rebuked the people at the end of a career that involved leading them through many positive events, such as the Exodus from Egypt, the Splitting of the Sea, the giving of the Torah, and so on. Jeremiah is being required to go straight to rebuke with no chance to establish a positive relationship or even to learn how to remonstrate with the people in a way

they might accept.

Verses 7-10 do little to assuage his worries. God rejects his complaints, tells him he has to go where God sends him, do what God tells him without fear, the whole time being confident that God is with him. Jeremiah was not given the right we cherish, of picking his course in life, nor even to enter his career when he felt ready.

### **Verses 11-19: Two Introductory Visions**

The rest of the chapter tells of his first two visions, training runs for the ones to come. In each case, the message seems less significant than the vision's serving to prove to Jeremiah that he had the skill to interpret the visions sent him.

In the first, Jeremiah is asked what he sees, and he says a "*makel shakeid*, an almond stick." God praises his description, since it grasps not only the budding destruction, but that God is "*shoked*, hurrying," to bring about His plans.'

The second vision, of the boiling pot with its face to the North, tells us that the Destruction will come from the North, with Jeremiah again praised for the detail of his rendering of the vision. The emphasis on skill suggests that there is a skill to prophecy, that prophets could not simply record what they saw, in contrast to Moses, who had "only" to write what he was told.

### **Chapter 2, Verses 1-3: A Convenient Ending or a Substantive One?**

The last three verses of the *haftarah* come from chapter 2 of the book, which might have meant they should be read as part of next week's *haftarah*, which picks up where this one left off. Leaving aside possible technical answers, I see these verses as providing closure to the section we've read. We have met Jeremiah, beginning to serve as prophet of doom long before it was even a possibility on anyone's horizon, predestined for a difficult life in which he is required to focus, more singlemindedly than the rest of the prophets, on the Jews' lacks, the reasons they will see the Destruction of the Temple.

Seeing God set up a prophet of such doom so far in advance of punishment would, for a human judge, imply a lack of openmindedness. By closing our *haftarah* with a reminder of our historically better relationship, we are being told that God takes no pleasure in the punishment being predicted, that God is being "forced" by our actions to adopt a particular posture and effect on our lives.

#### *Jeremiah's Tragedy and Ours*

If the evil coming to the Jewish people had already been determined, perhaps irrevocably, Jeremiah's role raises questions. It seems impossible that he would be forced to spend his life rebuking the people and predicting a destruction that had already been determined.

What we are meant to realize, especially as part of the Three Weeks, is that much of the destruction was not predetermined. Such issues as the fate of the Temple and whether the whole people would have to go into Exile were decidedly still open to better outcomes than came about. Indeed, had the Jews responded better to his prophecies, he might have spent more of his time focused on non-Jews.

So the point of the *haftarah* is to introduce us to Jeremiah, meaning a prophet sent forty years before the coming of a disaster, to help the Jews see and avoid as much of it as possible. As the Jews of that time failed to heed him, we are meant to read this week's haftarah and try to avoid a similar outcome. As Maimonides says, we fast today because our actions are like those of our forefathers. Rectifying those failings are the way to extricate ourselves from the Diaspora, to return to a rebuilt Temple, Israel, and Davidic Kingdom.

Shabbat Shalom