

Bringing the Prophets to Life

Weekly insights into the Haftara by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler

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Tish'a b'Av

As I sat down to share thoughts about this week's haftara, it occurred to me that, over these years, I have never commented on the haftara reading of Tish'a b'Av. The omission of this haftara over the years is not surprising, as the fast itself is never observed on Shabbat and, therefore, the haftara is never read on Shabbat. Yet, although this "omission" may be understandable - it is also unfortunate. Yirmiyahu's message in the 8th and 9th chapters of his book requires proper review and study if we hope to fully absorb the lessons of the day. And, given that this Shabbat is, actually, Tish'a b'Av, the ninth of Av, it behooves us to delve into this selection, a reading that, all too often, we fail to appreciate, overwhelmed, as we are, by the emotions of the day.

Sefer Yirmiyahu is replete with descriptions of Israel's corruption, of prophecies of doom and warnings of the impending punishments. Given this truth, it should be no surprise that the selection for this solemn day, taken from the 8th and 9th

p'rakim of the book, is one quite difficult to read and most painful to study. However, I believe that it is essential for us to do so and, while doing so, to ponder why these specific two p'rakim were chosen for this day.

The haftara opens with two terrifying words - Hashem's declaration to Yirmiyahu - ASOF ASIFEIM. Yet, I dare say, most of us do not understand how terrifying those words are! G-d's statement is not a promise of "gathering" Israel (ALEF-SAMACH-PEI - to gather") but rather a prophecy stating: "I will utterly destroy them!" (SAMACH-VAV-PEI - to destroy [see Tz'fanya 1:1-2]). Hashem's terrible promise is followed by Israel's reaction to flee and hide from the coming destruction because "We have sinned to Hashem".

As the haftara continues, we find a kind of conversation - almost a give and take between the prophet, the people and Hashem, lending an atmosphere of dialogue between the parties. G-d reiterates His commitment to bring the punishments while, as the eighth perek draws to an end, we hear the heart-rending cries of the prophet over the impending destruction of his nation.

Yirmiyahu continues bemoaning the fate of Israel and even expresses his

own pain for his failure to turn the people from sin. And, after reinforcing the navi's description of Israel's corruption, Hashem closes the condemnations with a play on words that brings us back to his opening statement. For, in describing the total destruction, G-d tells the people that their corpses would be strewn on the field V'EIN M'ASEIF" -none will be there to gather (ALEF-SAMACH-PEI) them for burial.

I know; pretty gruesome. So what positive thing did the Rabbis see - if any - in such a depressing and frightening selection?

I believe that there a number of subtle but hopeful moments found in this prophecy that may have moved Chazal to establish that it be read on Tish'a b'Av. We find, for example, Israel's admission of their guilt and their acceptance of the inevitability of their fate (8:14). We also hear the emotional outpouring of the navi and the pain he expresses upon their doom, helping us understand the terrible struggles that Yirmiyahu suffered in carrying out Hashem's mission. And, I believe, we might even glimpse some of G-d's "pain" - even His reluctance to mete out the necessary punishment - when He cries: "How can I not punish such a people?" (9:8) almost expressing a

desire to find a reason to withdraw His threatened punishments. Perhaps.

But, for me, it is the dialogue that seems to be taking place between the three affected parties: the contrition expressed by the punished, the pain shared by the agent and the reluctance implied by the "Executor". Even before the consoling words that close the haftara, we sense a certain comfort in the fact that they're still talking to each other.

The sinner, the accuser and the Judge are in a dialogue.

And as long as they are still talking... there is still hope. ✨