

Bringing the Prophets to Life

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

Author of Bringing the Prophets to Life (Gefen Publ.)

B'chukotai - 17 p'sukim, Yirmiyahu 16:19-17:14

As we did last week, we again read a message from Yirmiyahu HaNavi in this week's haftara. But unlike last week's reading, one that focused upon assuring Israel that she would yet return to her land, today's haftara reflects the harsh words of the tochacha, the admonition that we read in this week's parsha. In it, the prophet eschews any words of comfort as he rails against the wayward nation who had turned to other gods. Yirmiyahu, contrasts the fate that would befall those who have forsaken G-d with those who have remained faithful to Him. The devoted followers are likened to a lush tree planted by a brook whose roots spread, whose foliage and fruit are lush and who could, therefore, survive even a drought. Those unfaithful to Hashem, however, are equated to a lone tree planted in a desert - a parched wilderness - where, Yirmiyahu implies, it grows few roots and little fruit, and therefore, would not survive the difficult years of drought.

The prophecy, when seen in light of the Torah's tochacha, is certainly a logical choice for the haftara. Like the parasha, our haftara reading predicts the punishment of exile for sinful Israel, warning

that Israel will, in the end, be forced to serve her enemies. Interestingly, Yirmiyahu uses the unique term of V'SHAMAT'TA (v. 4) meaning that Israel would "withdraw from the land" an expression that echoes the Torah's condemnation of Israel refusal to "withdraw from the land" i.e., to observe the SH'MITA- while living in their own land.

And there is yet another connection that makes this selection a fitting one for this parasha.

The haftara closes on a strange note. Yirmiyahu seems to have completed his harsh message to the nation and then, strangely, turns to Hashem and speaks of his own condition. R'FA'EINI HASHEM V'EIRAFEI", he cries, "Heal me, Hashem, and I will be healed." Beyond trying to understand what the words themselves denote, we are puzzled regarding as to why it was even included in the haftara. Some commentaries suggest that Yirmiyahu was asking for relief from the "wounds" he received, the hateful words and curses he heard from the sinful nation. Some believe that the prophet was requesting healing for the actual physical pain he received from the blows and rough treatment he received from the nobles and officers. And there are yet others who believe that Yirmiyahu was praying for the nation itself, hoping that G-d would cure their "illness", to remedy their lack of faith in G-d.

I prefer relying upon this last approach

that, I feel, fits in well with the basic theme of Yirmiyahu's prophecy, i.e., the people's lack of trust in Hashem. The navi began by admonishing those who relied upon false gods, those who trusted in wealth or those who were confident in their power. Here, the prophet closes these thoughts with the words R'FA'EINI... , expressing the idea that ONLY if G-d heals me am I truly cured and ONLY if Hashem saves me will I have true salvation! Trust in anything else is false and useless. This is precisely what the Torah expresses as well, since the failure to observe shemita was due to the nation's lack of faith in G-d's promise that there would be enough for them during these Sabbatical years.

Yirmiyahu's words of faith were a powerful message to the ancients and they remain just as relevant for us today. ✨