

Message from the Haftara

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Being Worthy of the Gift

B'HAR-B'CHUKOTAI

Each year, in the days leading up to Yom Yerushalayim, we witness something remarkable. Thousands of young people make their way to Jerusalem for a Shabbat of daglanut, gathering and dancing with Israeli flags as they enter the Old City to celebrate its return to Jewish sovereignty. It is one of the most stirring expressions of our time: young Jews, united in their love of Jerusalem, ascending to the city that has stood at the center of Jewish prayer and longing for millennia.

The haftara for B'har-B'chukotai, from the book of Yirmiyahu, speaks to this moment in an oblique but powerful way. The prophet turns his gaze toward Jerusalem as the seat of the Divine Presence on earth: "Like the throne of glory, elevated from the beginning, so is the place of our Temple" (Yirmiyahu 17:12). It is a verse of extraordinary dignity and love.

Yet alongside this vision, Yirmiyahu's message also delivers a sober warning. The land and the city so

precious to us are not ours by inherent right. They are contingent on our own behavior and moral worthiness. "You will forfeit, by your own fault, the heritage which I have given you" (v. 4), the prophet warns, adding that if the covenant is broken, it leads to exile. Israel and Jerusalem have been entrusted to us, but we must act with moral responsibility in order to remain worthy of them.

This juxtaposition of praise and warning is not merely a literary structure. It is a challenge to every generation, including our own. On Yom Yerushalayim, we celebrate, as we should. The return of Jerusalem to the Jewish people since 1967 is a modern miracle, one that continues to move anyone who takes seriously the sweep of Jewish history and the depth of Jewish prayer. But the question Yirmiyahu places before us is: are we acting as worthy stewards of this gift?

It is a question that becomes more difficult in moments when joy feels compromised. We don't need to look further than this week's news for examples of individuals outwardly identifying with religious Judaism who act in ways that distort its moral core. For example, an unprovoked attack on a nun walking down the street, or past instances of Yom Yerushalayim celebrants marching to the Western Wall in the Old City,

harassing Arab shopkeepers and residents, causing fear among children and families who live there. These moments dare not be dismissed or ignored. They sit uncomfortably alongside the joy we feel, and they demand moral clarity.

Yirmiyahu understood that a nation's ability to remain in its land is not a matter of geopolitical strength alone. "God searches out the heart and examines inner thoughts", he proclaims, "so as to treat each person according to ...the fruits of his actions" (v. 10). In other words: it is not about the flags we carry, the songs we sing, the passion with which we ascend to the Old City. It is about the "fruit" of our actions - the way we behave, how we treat the people around us. That is the measure by which we are judged.

In fact, the mourning practices that overlay S'firat HaOmer, which we are still observing as we read this haftara, were instituted in response to the tragic loss of Rabbi Akiva's students, whose greatness in Torah was overshadowed by a failure in mutual respect. Their story is a reminder that even the most elevated spiritual aspirations can be undone by immoral conduct. If this period of disrespectful behavior two millennia ago still casts a shadow over our calendar, it is because the lesson has yet to be fully absorbed.

Jerusalem is a gift of incomprehensible magnitude. The sight of young people flooding its ancient streets - flags raised high, voices raised in song - stirs joy in our hearts. But Yirmiyahu calls us to something deeper than celebration alone. He demands a responsibility that makes the celebration meaningful.

As we conclude the book of Vayikra and its vision of a people living in harmony with God's Torah, as "a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation" (Sh'mot 19:6), and as we prepare to mark Yom Yerushalayim, let us truly absorb the haftara's dual message: the greatness of Jerusalem, and the weight of what it demands from those who enter it. That calling is renewed every time we pass through the gates of the city we love. 