

Message from the Haftara

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Inspiration Over Rebuke

PI-N'CHAS

Beginning with the Shabbat following Shiv'a Asar b'Tamuz, the haftarot shift away from reflecting the themes of their accompanying parshiot and instead feature special readings from Yirmiyahu and Yishayahu, the great prophets of rebuke who warned of Jerusalem's destruction and exile. Yet, even within this pivot away from the weekly parsha, there is a compelling connection between this week's haftara and Parshat Pinchas; one that offers a powerful insight about the role of rebuke in leadership.

Yirmiyahu and Yishayahu were not celebrated figures in their own times. Their mission - to confront hypocrisy and corruption - made them deeply unpopular. The Talmud (Yevamot 49b) records that Yishayahu was ultimately killed by the wicked King Menashe, a sobering fate for a prophet who had enjoyed a warm and productive relationship with that ruler's father, the righteous King Chizkiyahu (Melachim Bet 19). Yet even Chizkiyahu was not exempt from prophetic criticism: When he stripped the Temple treasury to pay

tribute to the Assyrians, the prophets rebuked him for it (see Pesachim 56a).

Yirmiyahu fared no better: he was imprisoned as a national-security threat because of the unpopularity of his message (Yirmiyahu 37:15). This week's haftara opens at the very beginning of Yirmiyahu's prophetic career, with his call from God. From the outset, God prepares him for resistance: "As for you, be courageous; stand up and speak to them as I will instruct you. Do not break down because of them lest I break you down before them. I have made you today a fortress city, an iron column, and walls of bronze against the entire land - against the kings of Yehuda, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will wage battle against you, but they will not prevail, for I am with you", declares the Lord, "to rescue you" (Yirmiyahu 1:17-19).

This divine fortification is not incidental; it is a necessity. God knows the rejection and persecution that lies ahead for the prophet.

This raises profound questions: If prophecy carries the word of God, why does it so often fail to change the people it addresses? Why are our gifted prophets regularly ignored, scorned, and threatened by those they addressed?

In a powerful insight, Tanach scholar Rabbanit Yael Leibowitz has sug-

gested that the problem may not lie in the message, but in the method. People rarely change because they are told they are wrong; they change when they are shown a better way to live.

When a person encounters a genuine model of proper behavior, when leadership draws them upward through example rather than pressing down through condemnation, the likelihood of lasting change is far greater. The fire-and-brimstone prophecies of Yishayahu and Yirmiyahu endure for generations, but in their own moment, they often fell on deaf ears.

Understanding this illuminates an unexpected connection with Parshat Pinchas. The parsha contains the ceremony in which Yehoshua is formally designated as Moshe's successor (Bamidbar 27:15-23), a moment that sets two paradigms of leadership side by side.

Moshe Rabbeinu was the towering figure who transformed the Jewish people from a nation of slaves into a people of destiny. He also led through rebuke when necessary, confronting failure directly and forcefully. Yet across forty years of his leadership in the wilderness, the people often struggled to internalize his message, cycling through rebellion, complaint, and resistance.

Yehoshua's model is strikingly different. He leads less through rebuke and more through example

and consensus building. When the time comes to cross the Jordan, the river does not part because Yehoshua wields a miraculous staff; it dries up through the presence of twelve ordinary Israelites, one from each tribe, who step forward together (Yehoshua 3:12). And in chapter 24, Yehoshua calls the people to reaffirm the covenant - not amid thunder and pyrotechnics, not under the duress of a mountain held over their heads, but through a quiet, voluntary ceremony of collective commitment. The result is remarkable: "Israel served the Lord all the days of Yehoshua" (24:31). This is a sustained commitment born not of coercion, but of collective choice.

The lesson is demanding precisely because it cuts against our instincts. When we see failure and wrongdoing, the impulse is to call it out - loudly, clearly, repeatedly. But the careers of Yirmiyahu, Yishayahu, and even Moshe, warn us that this impulse, however righteous, carries its own risks. Leaders who demand and denounce may be vindicated by history while failing in their own generation. It is those who model, who lift, who inspire from below, like Yehoshua, who achieve transformation that lasts.

May we be blessed with leaders who understand that lasting change is not imposed from above, but cultivated from within; not demanded through rebuke, but inspired through example. 🌍