

## Message from the Haftara

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## What the King Could Not Command

### MATOT-MAS'EI

The haftara for this week's parsha is drawn from the earliest prophecies in the book of Yirmiyahu, first delivered in the reign of Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda, whose rule began fifty-three years before the destruction of the First Beit HaMikdash. As we move through the Three Weeks between Shiv'a Asar B'Tamuz and Tish'a b'Av, it is worth pausing on the tension at the heart of this haftara. The struggle Yoshiyahu faces reveals something deeper: the difference between building a religious society and merely policing one, a distinction that is critical for today's leaders and educators to understand.

Yoshiyahu was nothing like his father, Amon, or his grandfather Menashe, both of whom were steeped in idolatrous practice. Even as a child, Yoshiyahu sought connection with God (Divrei HaYamim Bet 34:3). Once he came to power, he moved aggressively to root out idolatry, not only within the kingdom of Yehuda but in the regions of Efrayim and Menashe and the territory of Naftali as well. He personally supervised the

work, and when his reforms met resistance, that resistance was answered with force (see Melachim Bet 23:20). Yoshiyahu did not stop at legislating against idolatrous practice.

He was determined that his people adhere to the Torah's laws, in sharp contrast to his father and grandfather, and he threw himself into refurbishing the Beit HaMikdash, purifying it after its desecration and restoring its service to Torah norms. Divrei HaYamim Bet 34:9 describes him raising funds to rebuild the Mikdash, an effort that met with real success. In the course of that renovation, Chilkiyahu the Kohen Gadol discovered a Torah scroll written long before, perhaps as far back as the days of Moshe Rabbeinu himself (Melachim Bet 22:8), a discovery that only deepened Yoshiyahu's resolve to purify the land, its government, and the region of Judea of every trace of idolatry. As Divrei HaYamim Bet 34 closes: "Yoshiyahu removed all the abominations from all the territories belonging to the Israelites, and required all who were in Israel to worship the Lord their God; all his days, they did not turn away from following the Lord, God of their ancestors" (34:33).

Given all this, it is striking that Yirmiyahu's prophecies in this very haftara denounce the people of

Yehuda and Jerusalem for their idolatrous ways. Hadn't Yoshiyahu gone further than any king before him to eradicate the worship of foreign gods? The answer emerges in the chapter that follows our haftara, where Yirmiyahu observes that despite all of Yoshiyahu's efforts and reforms, the hearts of the people remained unfaithful: "Yehuda did not return to Me with all her heart, but with deception, declares the Lord" (Yirmiyahu 3:10). Clandestinely, people continued their idolatrous practices. For all his labor, Yoshiyahu could not truly transform the inner lives of ordinary people.

There is an important message here for us, drawn from this episode in which even a king's best intentions were met with resistance and quiet evasion. As I noted in last week's column, top-down leadership, however forceful, achieves only so much when it comes to matters of God, purpose, faith, and spirituality. These are commitments that cannot be legislated. Leadership can and should create a context that inspires, but that inspiration must be bottom-up as much as top-down.

This is precisely the challenge we face today whenever we imagine that faith and mitzva observance can simply be taught rather than nurtured within the right spiritual environment. It is also why I believe the oft-cited communal anxiety within the Relig-

ious Zionist world over DATLASHIM, young people who step away from observance, is overstated. Every young person is on a journey. Many ultimately return, as they mature and build families of their own, reconnecting with the education and experiences of their childhood. Those homes may look slightly different from their parents' or grandparents' homes, but they will be intentional rather than rote, animated by a genuine search for purposeful engagement with God, and filled with a living spirit of religious commitment.

A second message emerges as well. Yirmiyahu reminds us that beyond the public work of confronting corruption in society, there is always a subtler, more difficult private struggle. As we work to build a better society, we cannot fix our attention on the public sphere alone. If we do, we ignore the private space - the quiet lives of ordinary people - at our own peril. Yirmiyahu captures this with the image of a thief caught in the night: "Like the shame of a thief when he is found out, so will the House of Israel be shamed" (2:26), a metaphor for the hidden betrayals of God that happen behind closed doors.

We face our own version of this danger when teachers and youth advisors, whether through negligence or lack of awareness fail the children entrusted to them at critical

moments in their development. Preventing this requires clear, carefully designed protocols to respond to challenges that youth are facing in their observance or general relationship with Judaism. But beyond systems and safeguards, religious education must also reach the inner world of our students, listening to them, understanding their questions, and engaging seriously with how they think and feel about Judaism, both in belief and in practice. This is especially important today, as Am Yisrael deals with internal division alongside the ongoing pressures of war and rising antisemitism.

As we navigate the Three Weeks and prepare for Tish'a b'Av, we are reminded that our task is not only to construct a healthy public religious life, but just as urgently to safeguard the wholeness of our children and families in private, so that a genuine passion for God and Torah is cultivated continuously. Yoshiyahu could command the destruction of every idol in the land, but his authority could not shape the people's hearts. Our aspiration must reach further than his: not merely a nation with the right leaders, but a whole people, publicly and privately, dedicated to building a more perfect society. 