

# On the Haftarah: A Lesson from Jeremiah and Pinchas

For the haftarah of Pinchas, From the Teachings of the Rebbe

By Yitzi Hurwitz

The haftarah<sup>1</sup> of the first week of the Three Weeks is read either with parshat Matot (when it is read alone) or with Pinchas (when it is within the Three Weeks).

Because we are now in The Three Weeks—the darkest and saddest time on the Jewish calendar, when both our Temples were destroyed, and unimaginable suffering and tragedy befell our people—the haftarah we read is more connected to the time than the content of the parshah.

This week's haftarah starts off telling us Jeremiah's lineage. "These are the words of Jeremiah, son of Chilkiyahu of the Kohanim." It continues to tell us how he became a prophet. G-d tells Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the belly, I knew you, and before you emerged from the womb, I appointed you to be a prophet . . ."

Jeremiah says to G-d: "I don't know how to speak, for I am a youth."

"Don't say, 'I am a youth,' "G-d replies, "for wherever I will send you, you will go, and whatever I will command you, you will speak. Don't be afraid of them, for I am with you to protect you . . . See I have appointed you today, over nations and over kingdoms, to uproot, to crush . . . to build and to plant."

Then, G-d gives him the prophecy of the impending devastation of Judah and tells Jeremiah to warn the Jewish people.

The haftarah ends on a positive note: G-d remembers that we followed him in to the desert, trusting in Him. The idea behind that being that if we return to G-d and His Torah, He will accept us with open arms.

The theme of the haftarah is supposed to be connected to the tragic nature of the time of the year. The prophecy of devastation and even G-d's remembering our goodness makes sense. But how does Jeremiah's lineage and how he became a prophet fit the theme of The Three Weeks?

It all starts to become clear when we take a closer look at who Jeremiah was and when he lived.

Jeremiah lived in a time of great darkness, when the Jewish people were at a spiritual low. He himself was taunted regularly because of his pedigree, as his great-grandmother was Rachav, a gentile convert. It didn't matter that she was a great woman who helped the Jewish people in the conquest of the Holy Land. He had all the cards stacked against him, and yet, he brought about change from his dark situation (that is the only true and everlasting kind of change).

We've had many great prophets and leaders. Some affected the world from a place of light, like Moshe, with great miracles and revelation, with so much light that the Jewish people were taken by the greatness of the moment. Of course, they were good. But when the revelation ceased, they made a golden calf. The light affected them, but did not change them.

However, Pinchas (who stars in both portions of Pinchas and Matot), like Jeremiah, was coming from a place of darkness. He was also taunted because of his family, as his mother was Jethro's daughter, and he came to the fore in a low and dark time. But his actions caused the Jewish people to repent and change. This kind of change is real and everlasting. Therefore, his reward was an eternal one—that he and all his descendants would be Kohanim.

The Three Weeks is the time of darkness, symbolic of our dark exile. G-d is telling us how to approach times of darkness, and how specifically we, in this darkness, can bring everlasting change and light to the world.

The first thing you have to know is that you are worthy. You may think: "Who am I to make a difference; the whole world looks down at me?" To this, Hashem answers: "You are from Kohanim; you are holy and worthy."

The next thing is that we were hand-picked by G-d for this task. "Before I formed you in the belly, I knew you . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Don't say, "I am a youth,"<sup>3</sup> without the wherewithal to withstand the world's negativity. You can do it. "Don't be afraid . . . , for I am with you."<sup>4</sup>

This is the purpose of the exile. G-d has spread us all over the world. He has appointed us "over nations and over kingdoms"<sup>5</sup> to have a positive effect on our surroundings. This is the message of The Three Weeks—that specifically from the darkness, we are able to do the most good.

G-d wants us to affect the physical world and our own bodies to serve him as well. One who says, "Let me stay in my cocoon of light, of Torah and spirituality, and not deal with the physical," is making a mistake. It is the effect on the physical world and our physical nature that G-d wants most, and it is why G-d put us in a physical world—to develop the world, from the bottom up, to be a dwelling place for His presence. Which is the everlasting reward we all yearn for and will be experienced with the coming of Moshiach.

May he come soon.<sup>6</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Jeremiah 1:1-2:3.
2. Jeremiah 1:5.
3. Jeremiah 1:7.

4. Jeremiah 1:8.
5. Jeremiah 1:10.
6. Likkutei Sichot vol. 18 pp. 342-350.

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