



Parsha Bechukotai
Haftarah Jeremiah 16:19 - 17:14
May 17, 2014 / 17 Iyyar 5774

One of the hallmarks of the creation story in the book of Genesis is the manner in which it is distinguished from the Babylonian, Grecian, Norse, and other Creation epics. In those master stories, the universe was composed of gods and goddesses all of whom were born and eventually died. This is not the case in our story because our Creator is not subject to natural laws or to nature but stands beyond or above them.

Through out history we have lived along side numerous peoples, many of whom believed that the proper way to live was in accordance with the laws of nature. Many of these people saw divine sparks in every particle of creation. Those that denied God had personality, were called pantheists. If they believed these divine sparks were forces of nature and they named them and began to worship them, they were called polytheists. Farmers and shepherds, who believed in numerous gods and attempted to bribe them or to buy them off through all types of sacrifices in exchange for plentiful harvests, were polytheists. Unfortunately, the gods were also subject to nature and this method did not always work.

I have never understood why some people believe that living in accordance, in harmony, with nature is an idyllic process. Nature is fickle, and life is always a struggle. If the rains come too soon, our crops can die. If they arrive too late, our crops will die.

This morning's haftarah parallels the end of Leviticus, which is filled with warnings, blessings and curses. The Torah tells us that if we stray in belief and action, we will suffer the results. The haftarah builds upon these ideas and scorns those who have chosen to believe in a polytheistic world.

Jeremiah was concerned that the people of Judah would ally themselves with Egypt. He also feared our people's faith was misdirected. Rather than trusting and believing in God, our people were reverting to a polytheistic belief system that would be further reinforced if an Egyptian alliance occurred.

Jeremiah calls to our people and cautions them that, the children who remember their altars and sacred posts by verdant trees on lofty hills will be transformed by God into the slaves of their enemies. "If their beliefs continue to be misplaced, God will set them apart, "like a bush in scorched places of the wilderness."

Jeremiah calls to our ancestors: "Can't you see that God is our (mikvah) hope!" The Hebrew word for hope is mikvah (17:13). A mikvah is a ritual bath composed of living (fresh water). Men and women cleanse themselves and rid themselves of ritual impurity and uncleanness when they immerse themselves in the mikvah. The mikvah (hope) (God) is a fountain of living waters. It is from this hope that we derive our strength.

This haftarah reaches out and challenges us to understand Jeremiah's warnings and admonishments as more than a response to local politics. It sensitizes us to the fine lines that, if crossed, could disrupt our spiritual balance.

A fine line exists between kissing a mezuzah to remind ourselves we are entering a sacred place; and feeling guilty because we forgot to kiss it. A fine line exists between recognizing the mezuzah as a symbol of a way of life and believing that people can become sick because their mezuzah was improperly written or damaged. A fine line exists when we place overdue emphasis on possessions and forget to remember we have responsibilities to others. A fine line exists if we become overzealous and violate the choices of others. The haftarah reminds us to tread cautiously and to be careful where we place our trust, our faith. People and nations are as fallible as gods and spirits. Jeremiah sensitizes us to our own natures and cautions us to watch where we place our faith and to tread cautiously.

This week's Haftarah commentary is reprinted from one written for the Unraveller on May 8, 2010 by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC.