



**Parsha Mattot**  
**Jeremiah 1:1-2:3**  
**July 19, 2014 / 21 Tammuz 5774**

This is the first of the three prophetic readings that precedes the fast of the 9th of Av. The haftarah reflects a departure from any attempt to link the Torah portion with the Haftarah thematically and instead is connected to specific time periods. This practice began sometime in the late 3rd century to 5th century but wasn't fully established until the Middle ages. Each of the following three haftarot begin with an admonition and end with a consolation. "Watch out you sinners you're gonna be punished! But, Don't worry if you change your ways, God will forgive you."

This morning's haftarah begins with Jeremiah (who served from 627 B.C. to the eleventh year of the rule of King Zedekiah 586 B.C.E.) being called. He is shown his destiny through a vision of two items each of which is interpreted symbolically. The first, a branch of an almond tree is representative of God's presence, the second, the steaming pot, indicates the disaster to come.

Let's try to understand this historically.

Jeremiah lived during the period leading up to the Temple's destruction. He cautioned Zedekiah not to form an alliance with Egypt in order to stave off the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah believed that personal behavior would insure national prosperity. His advice wasn't heeded.

Two to three hundred years later the books of the prophets were finalized and included in the Canon, thus completing the second part of what we call the TAANACH. Eight to nine hundred years later, at least one hundred years after the destruction of the second Temple, our ancestors could have begun to read this Chapter prior to the 9th of Av. It could have been a reminder that God spoke to Jeremiah and Jeremiah spoke to the people. The people chose not to listen and consequently their temple was destroyed and they were exiled. If only they had listened to God's voice.

Sometime most likely after the codification of the prophets another series of books were also published. For reasons which we can only speculate or perhaps because they were written after the books of the prophets were canonized they were not included in our religious literature. These books were called the Apocrypha. One of these books, is the Testament of Baruch.

Baruch was the prophet's Jeremiah's scribe. It is possible that his book was meant to be added to Jeremiah, but for some reason it wasn't. Baruch's book was most likely published around the

time that Antiochus 4th ruled Syria and before the Temple was reconquered by the Macabees. That's right, this is the evil king in the Hanukkah story. Chapter 9 of Daniel was probably written at the same time and if you are interested, dear reader, give it a quick read and you will realize it's got Hanukkah written all over it.

The conquering of Jerusalem by Antiochus was understood to be a result of our people's failure to live morally. Once again the authors of the time saw a conqueror as an instrument of God's judgment. In the eyes of Baruch and Jeremiah before him, if our ancestors recognized this and changed their ways, God would remember them and our/their exile or punishment would not occur. This is what we refer to as Deuteronomic Theology (read the second paragraph of the Shema) even though Deuteronomy was written several hundred years earlier.

How can this haftarah speak to us today? In most instances our behavior leading up to the three weeks doesn't significantly change even though our tradition insists that we should refrain from eating meat, enjoying ourselves and having fabulous sex. On the other hand it can challenge us to consider what it takes to be a prophet, or at least what it takes to hear God's voice.

While prophecy ceased thousands of years ago and was replaced by the study of Torah which of course leads to personal insight, everyone has the ability to hear God's voice if they only listen.

### **An introduction to the Three Weeks and general stuff relating to fasts**

Nearly 25% of our haftarot are not related or even slightly connected to the weekly Torah portions. This was probably not originally the case. Some people believe that the haftarot that correspond to the weekly readings were replaced with special haftarot sometime around the fifth century C.E.

There are ten consecutive special haftarot. The first three are chanted during the three weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av and are referred to asbein ha-mezarim (between the straits) or telata de-purannuta, the Three Weeks of Admonition. The 17th of Tammuz marks the date when the walls of Jerusalem were first breached and the 9th of Av the Temple's destruction. These three haftarot reflect a magnitude that was and had an impact on our people that was greater than the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

As a result of this national tragedy a number of customs developed designed to reflect the sense of loss that our ancestors must have experienced evolved. Customs leading up to and surrounding fasts include not eating meat, drinking alcohol, going to movies or concerts and not scheduling weddings unless special circumstances warrant it.

The haftarah for the first of the three weeks prior to the fast of Av was selected from Jeremiah 1-2:3. The haftarah for the second week continues with Jeremiah 2:4-28. Both Sephardim and Ashkenazim end that haftarah differently.

We know that people began to observe the fast of Av sometime after the destruction of Solomon's Temple which was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E. Conflicting sources exist about when the actual destruction took place. The second book of Kings dates the destruction on the 7th of Av and Jeremiah informs us it was the 10th. This was further complicated by Josephus who recorded that the second Temple was destroyed by the Romans on the 10th of Av in 70 C.E. This day is still observed by the Karaites. The rabbis in Talmudic

times (around the 3rd century) reconciled these conflicting dates and determined that the 9th of Av would be the day devoted to national mourning.

The Mishna in the volume called Taanit (fasts) chapter 4:6 lists a series of calamities that theoretically occurred on the 9th of Av.

They were;

- The decree that the children of Israel should not enter the Promised Land.
- The destruction of the first and second Temples.
- The capture of Bethar, the last stronghold of the Bar Kokhba rebellion in 135 C.E.
- The establishment of a Temple on the site of the original Temple by Hadrian in 136 C.E. in Jerusalem. Hadrian renamed Jerusalem Aelia Capitolina and forbade Jews from entering. It appears that the Mishna influenced the Rabbis' decision.

### **When were the fasts created?**

Everyone knows that Yom Kippur is a day of fasting. Most people are aware that the 9th of Av is also a fast. Some people dimly recall that a number of additional fasts occur in our tradition. One of them is the fast of Esther. Another is the 17th of Tammuz. There are two additional fasts related to the Temple's destruction all of which are first mentioned in the book of the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah, if you remember, was one of the three prophets who lived in Babylonia and assisted in the rebuilding of the second Temple. Six hundred years later the Mishna in the book titled Rosh Hashana chapter 1:3 informs us about the fasting practices of the time.

We are uncertain how the fast days mentioned in Zechariah were observed before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. I suggest that you think of them as a series of customs in progress that were eventually codified in the 3rd-4th century.

Sources exist which indicate the evolution of our customs to fast. The Talmud tells us that not everyone who lived after the destruction of the 2nd Temple fasted. We are told that Eliezer ben Zadok who lived before and after the destruction of the 2nd temple did not fast. In fact a number of references in the Talmud actually discourage fasting.

"Don't fast lest you become a burden on the community" Samuel (180-257 leading Authority in Babylon under Rabbi Judah the prince) said, "whoever fasts is called a sinner". And even Zechariah (7:5) was uncertain if one should institute fasting as a national practice. "instead of fasting you should love truth and peace and as a result the former days of fast and mourning will become days of joy and gladness." One wonders if Zechariah would have felt the same way if he had lived after the Second Temple's destruction.

The language used in the earliest versions of the blessings chanted after the haftarah was concluded and the subsequent change of verbiage to the its current language hint that our rabbis some two hundred years after the Temple's destruction were attempting to diminish the impact of the Temple's destruction and to view life in a more joyous manner. If you are interested in reading more about this, please check our archives on the origin of the haftarah blessings.

*This week's Haftarah commentary is reprinted from one written in 2010 by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of "Understanding the Haftarot. An Everyperson's Guide".*