Jeremiah the Prophet & The Worst Deal Of Your Life

THE THREE HAFTAROT

The mourning customs observed between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av vary from one community to another. But there is a tradition that is the same for Sephardic, Ashkenazi, and all Jewish communities around the world: the Haftarot that we read during the three Shabbats between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av. These three texts are known in Hebrew as □□□□ □□□□□□□□□, the prophecies that predicted the tragedies we had to live through.

First, let's better understand what the Haftarah is. In the synagogue, after completing the reading of the weekly Torah portion, we read a text from the Prophets that relates in content to the biblical portion that has just concluded. The Haftarot were established by our Sages about 2,000 years ago when the Romans prohibited Jews from reading the Torah, with the purpose of recalling the weekly biblical portion. The Haftarot we read during these three Shabbats, however, are not thematically related to the weekly portion but to the destruction of the Bet haMiqdash and the exile.

To be more precise, these Haftarot that describe the historical events related to these tragedies were expressed by two prophets, Jeremiah and Isaiah when they warned the people of Israel about the consequences of abandoning the covenant with God, that is, His Torah. The message is very simple: when the Jewish people do not follow God's commandments, when they worship idols and commit other abominations, the Almighty suspends His protection, and the Jewish people—who were never known for their military power—are at the mercy of their ruthless enemies and consequently suffer invasions, destruction, and exile.

EXCHANGING A NATURAL SPRING FOR A POROUS CISTERN

The first of the three Haftarot, which we read last week, is from the first chapter of the Book of Jeremiah (Dibré Yirmiyahu) and deals with his initiation into prophecy and his delicate mission to warn Israel about the consequences of their actions. The Haftarah corresponding to this week's Torah portion, Mattot-Mas'e, is the second of the three special Haftarot. The prophet Jeremiah criticizes Israel for abandoning God and being ungrateful to Him, forgetting that Hashem took us out of slavery, protected us from the dangers of the desert, and led us to a land of abundance.

Jeremiah expresses shock and indignation at the behavior of Israel and says with sorrow that if one were to search in all corners of the planet, it would be difficult to find a nation so foolish and senseless. To exemplify the behavior of our people, Jeremiah uses a profound metaphor: a town has a beautiful spring of fresh and abundant water. This natural source continuously produces water and doesn't even require maintenance. The people of this town are truly privileged: unlike all other cities, they do not depend on collecting rainwater for their survival because the freshwater source provides them with everything they need for their well-being and prosperity. Jeremiah implies that Hashem, God, is to Israel what the water source is to that privileged people: their abundant privileged source of life. But inexplicably, the people of that town abandon the water spring, turn their backs on it, and to obtain water; they dig cisterns with their own hands! These artificial wells do not have their own water; they are completely dry when it doesn't rain and cannot even retain the water they absorb from rain because they are full of cracks. Who would conceive of abandoning a natural water spring and seeking to collect the precious liquid in broken cisterns?

This is the powerful message of Jeremiah's text. Abandoning God, the source of physical and spiritual life for Israel is

not only a betrayal of our covenant with God but also an act of foolishness, a shame for anyone who considers themselves intelligent. And, of course, it is also “offensive and humiliating to the Abandoned Spring,” that is, God, who has been “replaced” by His own nation and replaced with false idols that the Yehudim have made with their own hands.

WHO WILL HELP US NOW?

Although the rabbis added some additional verses to conclude the Haftarah with a positive and hopeful message, towards the end of this text, we find a verse with a harsh but very relevant lesson that, unfortunately, we still need to learn. On the one hand, the people of Israel abandoned God, betrayed Him, turned their backs on Him, and sought false gods. But, surprise! When the Jews have to face difficult times and imminent tragedies, they finally realize that the gods of Egypt, Assyria, and other nations were only clay and wood. And only then, when no one else can help them, they remember God, pray to Him, and plead: “Please, Hashem, save us, rescue us!” (Jeremiah 2:27 □□□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□).

If we look for a relevant lesson for the present in this Haftarah, perhaps this is the most fitting one. In difficult times when we are desperate because no one else can help us, only then do we remember God, pray to Him, and say, “Please, help us.” And when we are fine, we forget about our Creator, abandon His commandments, and don’t even thank Him for His continuous and abundant blessings.

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