Matot-Masei 5779-2019: Jeremiah's Prophecy: An Ancient Message for Contemporary Times

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This Shabbat, when parashiot Matot and Masei will both be read in diaspora communities throughout the world, the diaspora communities will finally catch up to the Torah portion that is read in Israel. Both Israel and the diaspora will conclude the fourth book of the Torah —Bamidbar-Numbers. On Shabbat, when the final verse of parashat Masei is read, the Torah reader will call out: חֲזַק חֲזַק וְנִתְחַזֵּק , "Let us be strong, let us be strong, and let us be strengthened!"

One week ago, on Sunday, the Fast of שִׁבְעָה־עָשָׂר בְּתַמּוּז , the 17th of Tammuz was observed by Jews worldwide to commemorate the day when the besieged walls of Jerusalem were first breached by the Babylonians and the Romans. This fast marks the beginning of the 21 day period known as the "Three Weeks," the tragic days which precede תִּשְׁעָה בְּאָב , the Fast of the Ninth of Av, that commemorates the destruction of the two Temples. During these three weeks, it is customary for synagogues throughout the world to read what has come to be known as תְּלָת דְּפֻרְעָנוּתָא , the three Haftarot (prophetic messages) of destruction, from the Books of Jeremiah and Isaiah.

Since this will be the second Shabbat of the Three Weeks, selections from Jeremiah 2:4-28, 3:4 and 4:1-2 are read. The prophet Jeremiah lived both before and after the destruction of the Temple. Approximately two thirds of his prophecies concern destruction, while one third contain words of consolation.

The ringing messages of Jeremiah contain many contemporary implications. Jeremiah is distraught over the fact that the people have forsaken G-d and gone after "nothingness." In Jeremiah 2, the prophet, in the name of G-d, calls out to the Jewish people, saying: "What unrighteousness have your fathers found in Me that they have gone far from Me, and have walked after things of naught, and are become naught?"

As a result of abandoning G-d, the prophet declares, the people themselves have become nothingness, and their lives have been rendered meaningless. Furthermore, continues Jeremiah, "Neither said they: Where is the L-rd Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and pits, through a land of drought, and the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man has dwelt?" How, the prophet asks, can the Jews have forgotten so quickly the miraculous exodus from Egypt, and the unprecedented survival of the Jewish people during their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness?

"And I [G-d] brought you into the land of fruitful fields, to eat the fruit thereof and of the good thereof." G-d says, I gave you this wonderful land, and what did you do to it? "When you entered," says the prophet, "you defiled My land, and made My heritage an abomination." The Jews quickly forgot G-d, says Jeremiah. "The priest said not: 'Where is the L-rd?' and those who handle the Torah, knew Me not." Even those involved in Torah learning, says the prophet, only held on to the Torah, they didn't truly imbibe it, and allow the message of the Torah to penetrate and impact on them.

"And the shepherds transgressed against Me, the prophets also prophesied in the name of Baal, and walked after things that do not profit." When the shepherds are lost, asks the prophet, what can we expect of the flock? When the leaders, who lead the people, go astray, can there be any hope?

G-d therefore implores, "Wherefore will I yet plead with you, and with your children's children will I plead. For pass over to the isles of the Kittites, and see, and send to Kedar, and consider diligently, and see if there has been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, which are yet no G-ds? But My people have changed its glory, for that which does not profit."

The prophet is dismayed by the fact that, in the entire history of humankind, nations have been praying to the most senseless and meaningless "gods," and yet the people remain loyal to them, but Israel, who worships the true G-d, switches its G-d.

The prophet continues, "Be astonished, O heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be exceedingly amazed, says the L-rd. For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." Says G-d, I know that you have switched Me. But, if you're going to switch, at least switch Me for something that appears to be useful. Instead, you have switched quality cisterns that hold water, for broken cisterns that leak and hold no water. You Jewish people, when you stray from G-d, you pick the most irrational, most senseless, most distant ideas to replace G-d.

Asks the prophet, "Is Israel a servant? Is he a home-born slave? Why is he become a prey?" How could the Jewish people have strayed so far? Do they come from an ignoble background that has led them astray?

Declares the Al-mighty, "For from old time have I broken your yoke, and burst your bands, and you [Israel] said: 'I will not transgress.' Yet, upon every high hill and under every leafy tree you did recline, playing the harlot." I was always there for you, says G-d. I was always there to rescue you. You promised to be loyal to Me, but I always find you unfaithful.

How can it be? says G-d. "Yet I had planted you a noble vine, a wholly righteous seed. How then did you turn into a degenerate plant of a strange vine to Me?" You come from the most noble of origins. You are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the offspring of King David and Elijah the Prophet, a kingdom of Priests and a Holy People, how could you have gone so far astray, how could you forsake Me?

Continues the prophet: "Who says to a tree: 'You are my father,' and to a stone: 'You have brought us forth.' For they have turned their backs unto Me, and not their face. But in the time of their trouble they return to Me and say: 'Arise, and save us!' But where are your gods that you have made for yourselves? Let them arise, if they can, and save you in the time of trouble. For according to the number of your cities are your gods, O Judah." Since you have so many substitute gods, why not just call on them to help you in your time of need? Suddenly, in the foxhole, you rediscover G-d? It doesn't work that way!

These are the words that G-d conveyed to the great prophet Jeremiah over 2500 years ago. Could these prophesies possibly have relevance to our generation as well? Could Jeremiah be directing his words to us, the most successful and most highly educated generation of Jews in

to our generation as well? Could Jeremiah be directing his words to us, the most successful and most highly educated generation of Jews in history? To us, the generation of opportunity, the Jews of the Golden Era, of the 20th and 21st centuries...and, yet, a generation that has perhaps become the generation of the greatest Jewish apostasy in all of Jewish history, one of the most illiterate generations in all of Jewish history. How could this be?

The message of Jeremiah is loud and clear. The words may have been spoken yesterday, but they resonate directly with us today. We must heed the words of the prophet Jeremiah, and take his message to heart. Let us give G-d a chance.

In Jeremiah 4, Jeremiah concludes his message to the Jewish people on an upbeat note, pleading with them, beseeching them: "If you will return O Israel says the L-rd, return unto Me, and if you will put your detestable things out of My sight, and will not waver, and will swear as the L-rd lives in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, then shall the nations bless themselves by Him and in Him shall they glory." If only the Jewish people recognize G-d as their Father and Guide, then all humanity will recognize G-d, and this recognition will bring about the ultimate spiritual redemption for all.

It is in our hands now. Let us, during these special and propitious times, the "Three Weeks," reaffirm our commitment to G-d. Let us spare the world and ourselves the experiences of sorrow and mourning. Let us embrace Jeremiah's message, and bring much happiness to the world.

May you be blessed.

Please remember: Rosh Chodesh, the first day of the new month of Av, will be observed from Thursday evening, August 1st, until Friday night, August 2nd. It marks the beginning of the "Nine Days," a period of intense mourning leading to the fast of Tisha B'Av.

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