

COMMENTARY ON HAFTARAH DEUTERONOMY

Haftarah Devarim “Remember”

Isaiah 1:1-27

Devarim (Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22) begins the last book of the Torah, and in many regards becomes like a final review of recent history, in preparation for the Israelites' entry into the Promised Land. In the fortieth year of their desert journey, Ancient Israel was encamped on the plains of Moab, overlooking the Jordan River to the west, and Moses began to reiterate many of the significant experiences of the previous forty years. Naturally, the critical story, of the twelve spies and how their conflicting reports propelled the unbelieving nation into years of wandering, dominated the discourse. Yet as noted last week, the corresponding Haftarah does not necessarily correlate to the opening chapters of Deuteronomy, but instead was an attempt by the Sages to prepare the hearts of the faithful for the remembrance associated with the national fast encouraged on the Ninth of Av.

Recall that during the time between the 17th of Tammuz and the Ninth of Av, the three Haftarah selections come from Jeremiah and Isaiah (Jeremiah 1:1-2:3; 2:4-3:4; Isaiah 1:1-27). Each reading is a stark reminder that the consequences of disregarding the commands of the Lord can be devastating. In the case of Jeremiah, who was an eyewitness to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, we have several warnings that need to be considered. This week we turn to Isaiah, who is often considered to be the preeminent prophet in the history of Israel, and is highly regarded for his many prophecies which admonished Israel for more than a century before the time of Jeremiah.

Isaiah lived and prophesied during a very tumultuous time in the history of Israel. During his lifetime, Judah and Israel were separate political states and constantly at odds with one another. From the Biblical and historical account, it appears that Isaiah functioned as a prophet during the reign of King Uzziah of Judah with his Temple vision (Isaiah 6:1) coming in 740 B.C.E., to his martyrdom sometime during the reign of wicked King Manasseh (696-642 B.C.E.). It was during this critical time that the Northern Kingdom of Israel was ravaged by the Assyrians, and was ultimately overwhelmed and widely taken into captivity between 734-722 B.C.E.

When the Sages chose to review the opening chapter of Isaiah prior to the Ninth of Av, the choice was designed to rivet the attention of Torah students on the gravity of disobeying God. From the opening verses of Isaiah, the Prophet stated God's dilemma with His people:

“Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; for the LORD speaks, ‘Sons I have reared and brought up, But they have revolted against Me. An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master’s manger, *but* Israel does not know, My people do not understand.’ Alas, sinful nation, people weighed down with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who act corruptly! **They have abandoned the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away from Him.** Where will you be stricken again, *as* you continue in *your* rebellion? The whole head is sick and the whole heart is faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head there is nothing sound in it, *only* bruises, welts and raw wounds, not pressed out or bandaged, nor softened with oil. Your land is desolate, your cities are burned with fire, your fields—strangers are devouring them in your presence; it is desolation, as overthrown by strangers. The daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a watchman’s hut in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. Unless the LORD of hosts had left us a few survivors, we would be like Sodom, we would be like Gomorrah. Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah” (Isaiah 1:2-10).

As you read this description of the depths of depravity that the Ancient Israelites had succumbed to, you find that Isaiah was not mincing words but was just *telling it like it was* in his era. Apparently, the debauchery was so severe that images of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah had to be invoked. Thankfully, the Lord left a few survivors, or those still seeking the righteousness of their Maker, which prevented Him from destroying the nation.

Next, we find that the Lord is not at all impressed with human attempts to appear holy. He sees through all of the outward appearances and looks directly to the heart. Sacrificial offerings, Sabbath gatherings, festival celebrations, and even prayer without the proper motivation are an abomination to Him:

“‘What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?’ Says the LORD. ‘I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle; and I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon *festivals* and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing *them*. So when you spread out your hands *in prayer*, I will hide My eyes from you; yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood’” (Isaiah 1:11-15).

After stating His disapproval of heartless rituals, which were used for mere subterfuge for the true heart motivations, the Lord stated what He desires of His people:

“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:16-17).

God requires that His people wash themselves and make themselves clean. *They are to confess and repent of their evil ways.* Evil deeds and thoughts are to be removed from their minds. They are to learn to do good, while seeking justice and reproofing the ruthless (Micah 6:8).

James the Just, half-brother of Yeshua, understood the need to defend orphans and widows, as such appropriate works demonstrate a proper walk with the Lord, and a proper obedience toward the Torah. James’ epistle admonished his audience to be doers and just not hearers of the Word, evidenced by works such as taking care of orphans and widows:

“For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately

forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his *own* heart, this man's religion is worthless. **Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world**" (James 1:23-27).

Isaiah was particularly concerned about Jerusalem. As a prophet to Israel, he warned that there was still time for the people to turn from their wicked ways. But if they did not change their evil ways, they would suffer the consequences of God's judgment:

"Come now, and let us reason together,' says the LORD, 'Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey, you will eat the best of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.' Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken. How the faithful city has become a harlot, she *who* was full of justice! Righteousness once lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross, your drink diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels and companions of thieves; everyone loves a bribe and chases after rewards. They do not defend the orphan, nor does the widow's plea come before them. Therefore the Lord GOD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel, declares, 'Ah, I will be relieved of My adversaries and avenge Myself on My foes. I will also turn My hand against you, and will smelt away your dross as with lye and will remove all your alloy'" (Isaiah 1:18-25).

The admonition of Isaiah in ancient times, and to those reading his words today, is very serious. If one refuses to consent to and obey the Lord, choosing to rebel against His requirements, then will He send a devouring sword? The Prophet Isaiah was most concerned about Jerusalem and how it had fallen from a time when righteousness was sought. Yet, a reward will come for turning from wickedness.

After a cleansing via the furnace of affliction, the Lord will restore righteous judges and counselors as in the days of old. Jerusalem will be renowned as a faithful city of righteousness. Zion will be redeemed with justice, and her repentant ones with righteousness:

"Then I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning; after that you will be called the city of righteousness, a faithful city.' Zion will be redeemed with justice and her repentant ones with righteousness" (Isaiah 1:26-27).

This should give us all hope today, just as it gave hope to those in the past. We know from our study of history that the Ancient Israelites did not corporately confess, repent, and take up the ways of pure and undefiled religion. So on the Ninth of Av: the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple, and the Romans would destroy the Second Temple. The center of God's people—what was believed to be the one place on Earth where He would have to not only dwell but could be communicated with—was taken away. Other traumatic events and tragedies have also occurred on the Ninth of Av, **and that is why we once again consider the words of Isaiah**. We do not want to repeat a pattern of sin leading to judgment!

I encourage you to prepare your heart for the fast of the Ninth of Av. Let us be a generation known for pleading the case of the widows, caring for the orphans, and desiring justice for the oppressed. Let us seek His righteousness as we do the work of the Kingdom, in whatever capacity He ordains. *We need to remember*.

Without remembering our sins, and rending our hearts before Him, where would we be? Does judgment sound appropriate? From God's perspective through the words of Isaiah

and Jeremiah and others, there is no other recourse—unless we confess and repent! Rather than read or hear and then look away, let us seek to do what He requires of His children.

Haftarah V'et'chanan "Consolation"

Isaiah 40:1-26

During the past three weeks of retribution from the 17th of Tammuz until the Ninth of Av, the period of mourning prior to the fast of the Ninth of Av resulted in Haftarah passages selected from Jeremiah and Isaiah that reminded us of the consequences of sin. The judgment of God executed by the foreign nations of Babylon and Rome, destroying the First and Second Temples, was something that the Sages and Rabbis wanted faithful Jews to consider and remember during this timeframe—from which we as Messianic Believers can surely benefit.

Now that the fast of the Ninth of Av is over, the emphasis turns toward comforting Israel, as the recollections of Deuteronomy for the next seven weeks prepare people for *Yom Teruah/Rosh HaShanah*, and the Ten Days of Awe culminating on *Yom Kippur*. This week's Sabbath is *Shabbat Nachamu*, starting the theme of the next seven weeks. For the next seven weeks of consolation, the ancients chose passages from the Prophet Isaiah for the Haftarah selections, as Isaiah 40:1, the first to be considered, begins with *nachamu, nachamu ami* (נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ אִמִּי), or "Comfort, O comfort My people."

While *Devarim* (Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22) always precedes the Ninth of Av, *V'et'channan* (Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11) always follows the fast and includes a reaffirmation of the Ten Commandments¹ and the *Shema*.² While the study of Deuteronomy finds Moses reiterating many of the episodes of the previous 39 years of Ancient Israel's journeys, the Haftarah readings are designed to keep focus on the consequences of sin, so that the past patterns of God's judgment do not reoccur. The choice of the highly respected and revered Prophet Isaiah's words for the next seven weeks, enhances the sense of gravity as people are encouraged to prepare their hearts through the month of Elul, to the Ten days of Awe, and ultimately for the Day of Atonement on the 10th of Tishri. The Sages and Rabbis took to serious heart the admonition to find yearly instructional ways to keep the Jewish community from departing from their roots, by teaching their descendants the critical lessons of life through a systematic study of the Word. Simply consider how Moses' statement to Israel in this week's very Torah portion is being adhered to by this course of study:

"Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, so that you do not forget the things which your eyes have seen and they do not depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons" (Deuteronomy 4:9).

As you consider the goals of the Sages and Rabbis, to keep the Jewish community focused on its responsibilities to future generations, let us turn to Isaiah 40 and let the words of this great Prophet comfort our souls. We too need to weigh the magnitude of keeping our own hearts sensitive and obedient to the commands of the Lord. After the opening repetition of

¹ Deuteronomy 5:1-21.

² Deuteronomy 6:1-9.