

Haftarot Unrolled: Pinchas/Matot

Calamity and Consolation

The three weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and 9 B'Av are a time of mourning the destruction of Jerusalem and all the calamities that have befallen the Jewish People throughout history. For those three Shabbatot, the custom is to read a specific set of Haftarot that are called "The Calamitous Three", in Aramaic, "Tlata de'Puranuta". The first week we read the first chapter of Yirmiyahu which warns of the impending destruction of Jerusalem.

One might think that the Haftarah would focus on describing the sins of the Jewish People which led to that destruction, or on describing the destruction itself. However, this chapter only hints at the destruction with word play¹ and symbolic images, and the sins are mentioned in passing. It's just not that scary.

So if the Haftarah is not about the causes of the destruction and not about the destruction itself, what does it teach us about this distressing time of the year?

The Haftarah ends with the following verses:

הָלֹךְ וְקִרְאתָ בְּאָזְנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם לֵאמֹר
כֹּה אָמַר ה'
זָכַרְתִּי לְךָ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ
אֲהַבַת כְּלוּלֶיךָ
לְכַתֵּךְ אַחֲרֵי בְּמִדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה
קִדְשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל לַה' רִאשִׁית תְּבוּאָתָהּ

Go and call out to the ears of Yerushalaim, saying,
so says Hashem:
I recall the kindness of your youth,
the love of newlyweds,
when you walked after me in the desert, in a land that is not sown.
Israel is holy to Hashem, the first of His crop...(Yirmiyahu 2:2-3)

After telling Yirmiyahu that the enemies are on their way to besiege Jerusalem, G-d reminds us of our earliest memories together, our time in the desert.

The Midrash presents a parable to explain the apparent incongruity:

משל למלך שנטל אשה היה אומר אין נאה הימנה אין משובחת הימנה אין מיושבת הימנה
נכנס שושבינה לבית ראה אותה מנוולת הבית אינה מכוונת המטות אינם מוצעות אמר לה
שושבינה הלואי את שומעת שהיה בעליך משבּחך לתוך השוק אין אותו השבח מעשי הללו
אמר השושבין אם כשהיא מנוולת כך הוא משבּחך אלו היית מתוקנת עאכ"ו כך דורו של
ירמיה חוטאין והוא אומר להם (ירמיה ב) זכרתי לך חסד נעורֶיךָ וגו' אמר להם ירמיה אלואי
אתם שומעין מה הוא אומר עליכם הלוך וקראת באזני ירושלים וגו' זכרתי לך חסד נעורֶיךָ
וגו' קדש ישראל וגו' אמר אם בשעה שהם חוטאים כך הוא מחבבם כשהם עושין רצונו עאכ"ו

¹ Yirmiyahu sees a stick made of almond-wood because the word for almond is the same as the word for "hasten".

A parable to a king that married a woman and was saying about her, "There is no one more beautiful than she is, there is no one more accomplished than she is, there is no one more cultured than she is." Meanwhile, her guardian came into the house and saw that she is a mess, her house is a wreck, the beds are not made. He said to her, "If only you were to hear your husband praise you in public! His praises do not match your actions!" The guardian said, "If when she's such a mess, this is how he praises her, if she were to put herself together, how much more so!"

So, too, the generation of Yirmiyahu were sinners, and G-d says about them, "I recall the kindness of your youth", etc. Yirmiyahu said to them, "If only you were to hear what He says about you! "Go call out to the ears of Jerusalem", and "I recall the kindness of your youth", and "Israel is holy to Hashem". If that is how much He loves you when you sin, when you do His will, how much more so!" (Midrash Bamidbar Rabba 2)

The point of this Haftarah is not to tell us how evil we are². The point is to tell us how important we are to G-d, how much He loves and cherishes His people. Even when we disappoint Him, He reminds Himself of our former acts of loyalty and love.

Therefore, the calamities that He has brought upon us were not due to His rejection, but rather the opposite, His desire to get us to fulfil our commitments to our relationship with Him.

This is why, when G-d tells Yirmiyahu about his mission as a prophet earlier in the Haftarah, it is defined as:

לְנֹשֶׁת וּלְנִתּוּץ וּלְהַאֲבִיד וּלְהָרוֹס
לְבָנוֹת וּלְנִטּוֹעַ

... to abandon, to smash, to ruin, and to destroy;
to build and to plant. (Yirmiyahu 1:10)

Yirmiyahu is tasked with warning of destruction and ruin, but also of rebuilding.

The ultimate purpose of the destruction of Jerusalem, and all the destructions that the Jewish People have faced throughout our history, was to build a better nation and to plant the seeds of a better society.

We will spend the seven weeks after Tisha B'Av reading the Haftarot called "the Seven of Consolation" ("Sheva de'Nechemta"), seven selections from Yeshayahu's words of comfort and hope. Yet even the Tlata de'Puranuta are based upon G-d's unconditional love for His people.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l
לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל

² More about that next week.