

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 in Aramaic, "Tlata de'Puranuta" ("the three of calamity"). The first week, which falls out on either Pinchas or Matot, we read the first chapter of Yirmiyahu.

One might think that the Haftarah would focus on describing the sins of the Jewish People which led to the destruction of Jerusalem, or on describing the destruction itself. However, the first chapter of Yirmiyahu is just not that scary. It only hints at the destruction with allusions and symbolic images, and the sins are mentioned only in passing.

So if the Haftarah is not about the causes of the destruction and not about the destruction itself, why do we read it during the weeks of mourning of the destruction?

The Haftarah ends with the following verses:

הֲלֹךְ וְקִרְאתָ בְּאָזְנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם לֵאמֹר
כֹּה אָמַר ה'
זָכַרְתִּי לְךָ חֶסֶד נְעוּרָיִךְ
אֲהַבַת כְּלוּלֹתֶיךָ
לְכַתֵּף אֲחֵרִי בְּמִדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה
קִדְשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל לַה' רִאשִׁית תְּבוּאָתָהּ

Go and call out to the ears of Jerusalem, 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 משבחך לתוך השוק אין אותו השבח מעשי הללו
אמר השושבין אם כשהיא מנוולת כך הוא משבחה אלו היית מתוקנת עאכ"ו כך דורו של
ירמיה חוטאין והוא אומר להם (ירמיה ב) זכרתי לך חסד נעורייך וגוי אמר להם ירמיה אלואי
אתם שומעין מה הוא אומר עליכם הלוך וקראת באזני ירושלים וגוי זכרתי לך חסד נעורייך
וגוי קדש ישראל וגוי אמר אם בשעה שהם חוטאים כך הוא מחבבם כשהם עושין רצונו עאכ"ו

A parable of 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 are¹. 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 earlier acts of loyalty and love.

From this we learn that the destruction of Jerusalem and the other calamities that we mourn during these weeks were not a sign of G-d rejecting us. In fact, it is the opposite. G-d's motivation in all of His interactions with us is to get us to fulfil our commitments to Him, and strengthen our relationship.

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

לְנִתּוֹשׁ וְלְנִתּוֹץ וְלְהַאֲבִיד וְלְהָרוֹס
לְבָנוֹת וְלְנִטּוֹעַ

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

Yirmiyahu is tasked with warning us of impending destruction and ruin, and at the same time he is tasked with 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 founded 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

¹ We'll hear plenty about that next week.