

Haftarah Helper 5781: Behar-Bechukotai¹

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Jeremiah 16:19-17:14

Jeremiah lived after the Northern Kingdom's fall to Assyria, as Babylon threatened Judah from the north. After generations of idolatry, corruption, and immorality, and facing opposition from nearly all of Judean society², his nearly impossible task was to reform Judah from within so that, relying on God and not allies, it could defeat its external threat. The Haftarah opens and closes with Jeremiah stating his personal, complete reliance upon God. He reminds Judah that all idolatrous nations will one day turn to God- yet Judah remains unmoved. Echoing themes and words of the Parashah's laws requiring trust in God, such as the sabbatical year, as well the Tochechah [Rebuke], he declares that an unrepentant Judah will be destroyed. He curses weak individuals who, like Judah as a whole, trust in idols or people, and blesses strong individuals who trust in God; unlike mortals, God knows and judges individuals' inner thoughts. This passage concludes with three³ declarations about the importance and consequences of trusting God. The Haftarah concludes "be'ki tov" (with an uplifting message), with the opening verse of an extended personal prayer by Jeremiah to God.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 16:19-21: As Jeremiah does now, gentile nations will one day recognize God- and be astonished at their ancestral idols. God will then show them His power.

Jeremiah 16:19	ירמיהו ט"ז:י"ט
O Lord- my strength, my stronghold, and my refuge in the day of affliction!- nations shall come to You from Earth's ends. They shall say, "Our fathers have inherited only lies [and] vanity which achieve nothing."	ה' עזי ומעוזי ומנוסתי ביום צרה אליה גוים יבאו מאפסי-ארץ ויאמרו אד-שקור נחלו אבותינו הבל ואין-בם מועיל:

Verses 17:1-2: But in the meantime, even Judah is infatuated with its idolatry.

Jeremiah 17:1	ירמיהו י"ז:א
Judah's sin is written with an iron pen and with the point of a diamond ⁴ . It is graven upon their heart's tablet and upon your altars' horns.	חטאת יהודה כתובה בעט ברזל בצפרן שמיר חרושה על-לוחם לבם ולקרנות מזבחותיכם:

Verses 17:3-4: Therefore, God will destroy His people, banishing them to a foreign land.

Jeremiah 17:4	ירמיהו י"ז:ד
You will forfeit, by your own fault, the inheritance I [God] have given you. I will enslave you to your enemies in a land you have not known. For you have kindled the flame of My wrath; it shall burn forever.	ושמטתה ובה מנחלתה אשר נתתי לך והעבדתיה את-איביה בארץ אשר לא-ידעת כיאש קדחתם באפי עד-עולם תנקד: (ס)

¹ With emendations, all translations are from Sefaria.org. To dedicate, comment, or subscribe, email haftarahhelper@gmail.com.

² King Josiah's reforms are a notable exception.

³ Verse 12's connection to the overall message of this passage is unclear; see comments of Rashi and Ibn Ezra for more.

⁴ Exact translation of this mineral is uncertain.

Verses 17:5-8: Those who trust man or idols are accursed and weak. Those who trust in God are blessed and strong.

Jeremiah 17:7	ירמיהו י"ז:ז
Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord- the Lord shall be his trust.	בְּרוּךְ הַגֵּבֶר אֲשֶׁר יִבְטַח בַּיהוָה ה' מִבְּשֹׁתָיו:

Verses 17:9-10: Though people cannot know others' inner intentions, God can and does- rewarding them according to their actions and their consequences.

Jeremiah 17:10	ירמיהו י"ז:י
I, the Lord, search the heart and try the kidneys ⁵ , to give [each] man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.	אֲנִי ה' תִּקְרַר לֵב בְּתוֹן כְּלָיֹת וְלִמְתָּ לְאִישׁ כְּדַרְכּוֹ [כְּדַרְכָּיו] כִּפְרִי מַעֲלָיו: (ס)

Verses 17:11-13: Three statements about trust in God and its consequences.

Jeremiah 17:11	ירמיהו י"ז:יא
As a partridge sits on [many] eggs that does not hatch them [all], so is he that gets wealth illegally: he shall abandon [his wealth] at midlife, and shall be a fool at his [life's] end.	קָרָא דָגֵר וְלֹא יֵלֵד עֹשֶׂה עֵשֶׂר וְלֹא כִּמְשַׁפֵּט בְּחֻצֵי יָמוֹ [מְיָו] עֲזֹבָנוּ וּבִאֲחֻרֵיתוֹ יִהְיֶה נָבֵל:

Verse 17:14: Jeremiah's prayer for healing and salvation from his enemies exemplifies his trust in God.

Jeremiah 17:14	ירמיהו י"ז:יד
Heal me, Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved- for You are my praise.	רַפְּאֵנִי ה' וְנִרְפָּא הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי וְאוֹשָׁעָה כִּי תִהְלֹתִי אִתָּה:

Connections

The Mishnah repurposes Jeremiah's plant imagery (17:6-8) to illustrate the **superiority of good deeds over wisdom**.

Pirkei Avot 3:17	משנה אבות ג:י"ז
Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah ...used to say: "One whose wisdom exceeds his [good] deeds, to what may he be compared? To a tree whose branches are numerous but whose roots are few: when the wind comes, it uproots and overturns it, as (Jer. 17:6) said, 'He shall be like a plant ⁶ in the desert, which does not sense the coming of good. It dwells in scorched places of the wilderness, in a barren land without inhabitant.' But one whose [good] deeds exceed his wisdom, to what may he be compared? To a tree whose branches are few but roots are many: even if all the winds in the world come and blow upon it, they cannot move it out of its place, as (ibid, 17:8) said, 'He shall be like a tree planted by waters, sending forth its roots by a stream. It does not sense the coming of heat; its leaves are ever fresh. It does not worry in a year of drought; it does not cease to yield fruit.'"	רבי אלעזר בן עזריה...היה אומר, כל שחכמתו מרבה ממעשיו, למה הוא דומה, לאילן שענפיו מרבים ושרשיו מעטין, והרוח באה ועוקרתו והופכתו על פניו, שנאמר (ירמיה יז) והיה כערער בערבה ולא יראה פי יבוא טוב ושכן חררים במדבר ארץ מלחה ולא תשב. אבל כל שמעשיו מרבים מחכמתו, למה הוא דומה, לאילן שענפיו מעטין ושרשיו מרבים, שאפלו כל הרוחות שבעולם באות ונושבות בו אין מזיזין אותו ממקומו, שנאמר (שם) והיה כעין שתול על מים ועל יובל ישלח שרשיו ולא יראה פי יבא חם, והיה עלהו רענן, ובשנת בצורת לא ידאג, ולא ימיש מעשות פרי:

⁵ The kidneys and heart are seats of thought in the Bible.

⁶ Exact translation of this plant is uncertain.