

Haftarah Helper 5781: Pinchas

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From this Shabbat until Shabbat Shuva, the weekly Haftarot relate to the Jewish calendar instead of the weekly Parashah. The first three of these Haftarot are the “**Three of Affliction**” (**Aramaic: תלה דפורענותא**), describing the destruction of Judah, Jerusalem, and the First Temple in 587 BCE. They are recited on consecutive Shabbatot of the “Three Weeks”, between the fasts of the 17th of Tammuz and Tisha B’Av. This year, as in most years, when Parashiot Mattot and Masei are read on a single Shabbat, the first such Haftarah is recited with Parashat Pinchas; in years when those parashiot are read on two Shabbatot, it is recited with Parashat Mattot¹.

Jeremiah 1:1-2:3

Amid social and political upheaval, the young prophet Jeremiah rises to action in Judah in 626 BCE. The Assyrian Empire weakens to the north, with uncertain consequences for Judah. Generations of idolatry have thoroughly corrupted Judean society, Jerusalem, the Temple and its divine service. Jeremiah’s prophetic predecessors have had only temporary successes in returning the Northern Kingdom (exiled a century earlier), Judah, and their leaders to God. The reigning king of Judah, Josiah, is beginning to steer a more righteous course.

In this, Jeremiah’s inaugural prophecy, God forces him to accept His nearly impossible assignment. God tells him that before his mother conceived him, He had already designated him as a prophet to Judah and the nations. His primary task is to convince Judah to return to God lest He send northern nations to destroy them. The mission will be difficult, and Jeremiah fears those who will attack him, just as they attacked earlier prophets. God therefore promises to strengthen and protect him- but if Jeremiah loses courage, God will allow them to destroy him. Jeremiah replies that his youthful inexperience should delay his mission. God swats this away with three striking visions showing that Jeremiah already has good prophetic vision, and that delay is not possible as He hurries to bring northern nations to destroy Judah for its sins. The Haftarah concludes on a positive note: God commands Jeremiah to remind Judah of their loyalty to Him after the Exodus, and that He will destroy those who attack them.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 1:1-3: From a priestly family living near Jerusalem, Jeremiah begins to prophesy in 626 BCE, the 13th year of Josiah’s reign.

Jeremiah 1:1	ירמיהו א:א
The words of Jeremiah, son of Hilkiyah, [one] of the priests [living in] Anathoth, in the land of Benjamin.	דברי ירמיהו בן־חלקיהו מן־הכהנים אשר בענתות בארץ בנימין:

Verses 1:4-10: God tells Jeremiah that He appointed him, before his birth, as a prophet to all nations. Jeremiah replies that he is not yet fit for this mission. God tells him not to fear, “placing” His word in the prophet’s mouth.

Jeremiah 1:10	ירמיהו א:י
See, I have this day appointed you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, to pull down, to destroy, and to throw down; to build and to plant.	ראה הפקדתיך היום הנה עליהגוים ועליהממלכות לנתוש ולנתוץ ולהאבד ולהרוס לבנות ולנטוע: {פ}

¹ In such years, when Parashat Pinchas is read before the 17th of Tammuz, its Haftarah is 1 Kings 18:46-19:21.

Verses 1:11-12: God shows Jeremiah he can prophetically “see” an almond tree branch. He tells him that it symbolizes His speed in carrying out His word.

Jeremiah 1:11	ירמיהו א:יא
The Lord’s word came to me, saying, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” I said, “I see a rod of an almond tree.”	וַיְהִי דְבַר־ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר מַה־אַתָּה רֹאֵה יִרְמְיָהוּ וַאֲמַר מִקַּל שֶׁקֵּד אֲנִי רֹאֵה:

Verses 1:13-16: God “shows” Jeremiah a boiling pot in the north. It symbolizes that God is bringing nations from the north to besiege Judah and Jerusalem for abandoning His worship to serve idols.

Jeremiah 1:15	ירמיהו א:ט"ו
“For, behold Me [as I] summon all the northern kingdoms’ families,” says the Lord. “They will come and place, each one, his throne at the entrance of Jerusalem’s gates, against all its walls around, and against all Judah’s cities.”	כִּי אֲנִי קוֹרֵא לְכָל־מְשֻׁפָּחוֹת מַמְלָכוֹת צְפוֹנָה נֹאֲמֵיהּ וּבָאוּ וַנִּתְנֹבְאֵי־שׁ כִּסְאוֹ פֶתַח אֲנִי שְׁעָרֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם וְעַל כָּל־חוֹמֹתֶיהָ סָבִיב וְעַל כָּל־עָרֵי יְהוּדָה:

Verses 1:17-19: God tells Jeremiah that he must stand strong, like an “iron pillar”, while delivering His words to Judah and its corrupt leadership.

Jeremiah 1:18	ירמיהו א:י"ח
I [God], behold I have made you today into a fortified city, an iron pillar, and copper walls against the entire land- against Judah’s kings, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land.	וַאֲנִי הִנֵּה נֹתְתִיךָ הַיּוֹם לְעִיר מְבֻצָּר וְלְעַמּוּד בְּרִזְזָל וְלַחֲמוֹת נְחָשֶׁת עַל־כָּל־הָאָרֶץ לְמַלְכֵי יְהוּדָה לְשָׂרֵיהָ לְכַהֲנֵיהָ וְלָעָם הָאָרֶץ:

Verses 2:1-3: God tells Jeremiah to tell Jerusalem that He remembers Israel’s loyalty to Him in the wilderness after the Exodus, and that He will punish those who harm His people.

Jeremiah 2:2	ירמיהו ב:ב
[Jeremiah,] go and call out in Jerusalem’s ears saying, “So said the Lord, ‘I remember for you the kindness of your youth, your love as [My] bride, when you went after Me in the wilderness, in an unsown land.’ ”	הֲלֹךְ וּקְרֵאתְךָ בְּאָזְנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם לֵאמֹר כֹּה אָמַר ה' זָכַרְתִּי לְךָ יְקָדָשׁ נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲהַבְתְּ כְּלוּלֹתֶיךָ לְכַתֵּךְ אַחֲרַי בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּאָרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה:

Connections

The Talmud asserts that the **almond branch Jeremiah saw symbolizes the Three Weeks** between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av.

Jerusalem Talmud Taanit 23a	תלמוד ירושלמי תענית כ"ג א
[There were] 21 days from when the city [Jerusalem] was breached [on the 17th of Tammuz] until the day of the Temple’s destruction [on the 9th of Av]. Rav Avunah said, “A sign [for this number of days] is, ‘I see a rod of an almond tree’ (Jer. 1:11): Just as an almond tree puts forth blossoms and produces its fruit 21 days later, so too there were 21 days from when the city [Jerusalem] was breached until the day of the destruction of the Temple.”	כ"א יום מיום שהובקעה העיר ועד יום שחרב בהמ"ק. א"ר אבונה סימנא (ירמיהו א) מקל שקד אני רואה מה הלזו הזה משהוא מוציא את ניצו ועד שהוא גומר את פירותיו כ"א יום כך מיום שהובקעה העיר ועד יום שחרב הבית כ"א יום.

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