

# Haftarah Helper 5781: Mattot-Maasei

Zachary Beer (Nachshon Project Fellow, The City College of New York)

Barry Kornblau (Rabbi, Young Israel of Hollis Hills-Windsor Park, Queens, NY)

This is the second of the “**Three [Haftarot] of Affliction**” (Aramaic: **תלת דפורענותא**), describing the destruction of Judah, Jerusalem, and the First Temple in 586 BCE. They are recited<sup>1</sup> on consecutive Shabbatot of the “Three Weeks”, between the fasts of the 17th of Tammuz and Tisha B’Av.

## Jeremiah 2:4-28, and 3:4 or<sup>2</sup> 4:1-2

[Last week's Haftarah](#) presented Jeremiah's call to prophecy in 626 BCE, and his Divine mission to warn Judah of imminent destruction and inspire it to return wholly to God. Its concluding verses instructed Jeremiah to remind the people, in God's Name, of their loyalty to God in the wilderness after the Exodus, and of His promise to destroy those who attack them.

Continuing with the very next verse, this Haftarah is how Jeremiah begins to deliver that message to the entire nation, including its exiled tribes, with particular emphasis on its political and spiritual leaders. Invoking the heavens and even other nations' loyalty to their false gods, he expresses astonishment at centuries of Israelite ingratitude for God's kindnesses after the Exodus. With searing images and derision, Jeremiah lambasts the people for their lustful enthusiasm for local idols. Their idolatry betrays God's kindness, defiles the land He gave them, distances them from His protection, and leads to the Land's destruction. As in the past, idolatrous allies will not only betray Judah, they will attack it. Contrary to the astonishing suggestion that even repentance cannot help them (v. 22), the Haftarah skips many verses in order to conclude with a tenuous call for repentance.

## Haftarah Breakdown

**Verses 2:4-8: Jeremiah reminds Judah and Northern Kingdom exiles that God redeemed them from Egypt and brought them to a good land, yet ungrateful generations have defiled it. Spiritual elites also abandoned God.**

Jeremiah 2:8	ירמיהו ב:ח
I brought you to a plentiful country, to eat its fruit and its bounty [but] you came and defiled My land, and made My heritage an abomination.	וּאָבִיָא אֶתְכֶם אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַפְּרִמָּה לְאָכַל פְּרִיָהּ וְטוֹבָהּ וְתָבֵאוּ וְתִטְמְאוּ אֶת-אֶרְצִי וְנִחַלְתִּי שְׁמִתְּהֶם לְתוֹעֵבָה:

**Verses 2:9-13: God will prosecute Judah, now and in the future, for its dual sins of abandoning God and of seeking out worthless foreign gods. No other nation has committed such a crime; even the heavens are astounded.**

Jeremiah 2:11	ירמיהו ב:יא
Has a nation [ever] exchanged its god, [even though] they are not gods? [Yet] My people exchanged its glory for that which helps not.	הֲהִימִיר גּוֹי אֱלֹהִים וְהִמָּה לֹא אֱלֹהִים וְעַמִּי הִמִּיר כְּבוֹדוֹ בְּלוֹא יוֹעִיל:

**Verses 2:14-15: These sins cause ferocious enemies to attack, kill, lay waste, humiliate, and take captives.**

Jeremiah 2:15	ירמיהו ב:ט"ו
Young lions roared over [Judah]; they raised their voices. They made its land a desolation, its cities burnt [until] without residents.	עָלְיוּ יִשְׁאָגוּ כְּפָלִים נְתָנוּ קוֹלָם וַיִּשְׁתִּיּוּ אֶרְצוֹ לְשִׁמָּה עָרָיו נִצְתָה [בְּנִצְתוֹ] מִבְּלֵי יֵשֶׁב:

<sup>1</sup> In years such as this year, 5781, when Rosh Chodesh Av coincides with Shabbat, some communities read this Haftarah. Others read the Haftarah for Shabbat Rosh Chodesh, Isaiah 66:1-24. A third group reads this Haftarah followed by verses from the Haftarah for Shabbat Rosh Chodesh.

<sup>2</sup> Ashkenazim read 3:4; Sephardim read 4:1-2. Both provide the Haftarah with a “bekhi tov” (positive note) ending.

Verses 2:16-19: Without trust in God, Judah seeks security in alliances with Assyria and Egypt. Instead of protecting Judah, however, Egypt will afflict it.

Jeremiah 2:18	ירמיהו ב:י"ח
And now, what do you [Judah, seek] on the road to Egypt to drink the water of the Shihor [Nile]? What do you [seek] on the road to Assyria to drink the water of [the Euphrates]?	וְעַתָּה מִה־לֶּךְךָ לְגִבְרָהּ מִצְרַיִם לְשִׁתּוֹת מִי שִׁחֹר וּמִה־לֶּךְךָ לְגִבְרָהּ אֲשׁוּר לְשִׁתּוֹת מִי נְהָר:

Verses 2:20-24: God’s “true seed,” His people, lustily abandoned Him for hilltop idols long ago. Their visible tracks in Jerusalem’s Gehinnom Valley betray their denials of idolatry and render useless their attempts to repent.

Jeremiah 2:23	ירמיהו ב:כ"ג
How do you [Judah] say, "I have not been defiled; I have not gone after the Baalim [idols]"? See your way in the Valley, know what you have done- [like] a lustful young she-camel, determinedly travelling her paths!	אֵיךְ תֹאמְרִי לֹא נִטְמָאתִי אַחֲרֵי הַבְּעֻלִים לֹא הִלְכִיתִי רָאִי דְרָכֶיךָ בְּגֵיאַי דְּעֵי מָה עָשִׂית בְּכַרְהָ קִלְהָ מִשְׁרַכֶּת דְּרָכֶיךָ:

Verses 2:25: God tells Judah not to weary itself by traveling to foreign allies. Judah reiterates its love for them.

Jeremiah 2:25	ירמיהו ב:כ"ה
[God told you, Judah, to] “withhold your foot from going barefoot and your throat from thirst!” [Yet] you said, "Despair! No! For I love strangers, and I will follow them."	מִנְעֵי רַגְלֶךָ מִיָּחָף וּגּוֹרֵךְ [וּגְרוֹנֶךָ] מִצְמָאָה וּתֹאמְרִי נוֹאֵשׁ לֹא כִי־אֲתַבְּתִי נְרִים וְאַחֲרֵיהֶם אֵלֶיךָ:

Verses 2:26-28: Judah and its leaders turn to God only as a last resort in times of trouble. God’s mocking reply: Let your idols save you!

Jeremiah 2:27	ירמיהו ב:כ"ז
They say to the wood, "You are my father," and to the stone, "You bore us," for they turned their nape to Me and not their face. [Yet] when evil befalls them, they say [to Me], "Arise and save us!"	אֲמָרִים לְעֵץ אָבִי אֶתְּךָ וּלְאֶבֶן אֶתְּךָ יִלְדִתַּנִּי [יִלְדִתַּנִּי] כִּי־פָנָו אֵלַי עָרְף וְלֹא פָגִים וּבְעַת רַעְתֶּם יֹאמְרוּ קוּמָה וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנו:

Verses 3:4<sup>3</sup>, 4:1-2: Despite Judah’s failings and their punishments, true repentance remains possible.

Jeremiah 4:1	ירמיהו ד:א
“If you return, O Israel,” says the Lord, “to Me, you shall return. If you remove your detestable things [idols] from My Presence, you shall not wander.”	אִם־תָּשׁוּב יִשְׂרָאֵל   נֹאמֵ־ה' אֵלַי תָּשׁוּב וְאִם־תִּסְרֹךְ שְׁקוּצֹתֶיךָ מִפָּנָי וְלֹא תִנְוֶה:

With emendations, all translations are from Sefaria.org. To dedicate, comment, or subscribe, email [haftarahhelper@gmail.com](mailto:haftarahhelper@gmail.com).

<sup>3</sup> The caption above summarizes 4:1-2, read by Sepharadim. Ashkenazim read v. 3:4: “From now on, you [Judah] should call Me, ‘Father [as] You are [my] Guide since my youth.’” In the context of its surrounding verses, this verse criticizes Judah for what it **should - but does not, due to its idolatry** - say about God when beseeching Him to save them from drought. Plucked from that context in order to end the Haftarah with a single, uplifting verse, however, it relates how we who hear the Haftarah **should - truly, as righteous believers** - relate to God.