



Mishpatim: Jeremiah 34:8-22, 33:25-26

Nebuchadnezzar's first siege of Jerusalem, ca. 597 BCE, concluded with Judah's king, Jeconiah, and the city's elite exiled to Babylon, followed by the installation of Zedekiah, Jeconiah's uncle, a king subservient to Babylon. A decade later, Nebuchadnezzar had conquered all of Judah except for two fortified cities. His second siege of Jerusalem was stretching into its second year, the city and its inhabitants increasingly desperate. Judah's ally, Egypt, then arrived, ending the siege as the Babylonians departed to battle the Egyptians.

At that moment of relief, the Haftarah recounts Zedekiah's decision to address a longstanding socioeconomic injustice and violation of Judean brotherhood: for generations, Jerusalem's powerful and wealthy elite had enslaved many of Judah's poor men and women. Zedekiah summons the slave owners to a dramatic ceremony in the Temple. There in God's presence, they voluntarily pledge to free their slaves, walking between the two halves of a slaughtered calf to symbolize that their pledge has the legal force of a solemn covenant. They then free their slaves - only to re-enslave them a short while later.

Jeremiah praises the mass emancipation as unprecedented in Israelite history, and as fulfilling God's command, recorded in the Parashah, to liberate Hebrew slaves after seven years of service. Jeremiah emphasizes that after freeing the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, God issued this command as part of the Sinai covenant. He then blasts the re-enslavement for desecrating their own voluntary pledge, as well as their ancient Sinai covenant with God. God will therefore punish them by bringing back the departed Babylonians. They will capture Zedekiah and his court, and brutally destroy Judah and Jerusalem and kill their inhabitants.

To conclude on a redemptive note, the Haftarah unusually reverses direction in the Biblical text, to a brief passage that just precedes its main narrative in the book of Jeremiah. These two verses declare that God's eventual restoration of David's royal line over Israel, descendants of the Patriarchs, is as certain as God's covenantal promise to govern Creation with His laws.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 34:8-10: Due to Zedekiah's royal edict, Jerusalem's residents liberate their Hebrew slaves...

Jeremiah 34:10	ירמיהו ל"ד:י
All the princes and all the people who had entered into the covenant heard that every one should send forth his manservant, and every one his maidservant, [to become] free, never again to enslave them. They obeyed and sent them forth [to be free].	וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ כָּל־הַשָּׂרִים וְכָל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר־בָּאוּ בְּבְרִית לְשַׁלַּח אִישׁ אֶת־עַבְדּוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶת־שִׁפְחָתוֹ חֲפְזִים לְבִלְתִּי עֲבֹד־בָּם עוֹד וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ:

Verses 34:11: ...and then re-enslave them.

Jeremiah 34:11	ירמיהו ל"ד:יא
Afterward, they relapsed, and brought back the servants and handmaids they had sent off [to be] free. They conquered them as servants and handmaids.	וַיָּשׁוּבוּ אַחֲרֵי־כֵן וַיָּשׁוּבוּ אֶת־הָעֲבָדִים וְאֶת־הַשִּׁפְחֹת אֲשֶׁר שְׁלְחוּ חֲפְזִים וַיִּכְבְּשׁוּם לְעֲבָדִים וְלַשִּׁפְחֹת:

Verses 34:12-15: As part of the covenant at Sinai, God commanded His people to release their Hebrew slaves after seven years of service. Jeremiah commends the Jerusalemites for doing so, unlike previous generations...

Jeremiah 34:15	ירמיהו ל"ד:ט"ו
You have now turned and done that which is right in My eyes, every man proclaiming liberty to his neighbor. You made a covenant before Me in the House called by My name.	וּתְשׁוּבוּ אִתְּכֶם הַיּוֹם וַתַּעֲשׂוּ אֶת־הַיְשׁוּרִים כְּעֵינַי לְקַרְאֵי דָרוֹר אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ וַתַּקְרְתֶּם בְּרִית לִפְנֵי בְּיַת אֲשֶׁר־נִקְרָא שְׁמִי עָלָיו:

Verses 34:16: ...but their subsequent re-enslavement desecrates God's name.

Jeremiah 34:16	ירמיהו ל"ד:ט"ז
You have [now relapsed and desecrated My name. Each of you has retrieved his servant and his handmaid, whom you all had sent forth to be free on their own. You conquered them to be servants and handmaids for yourselves.	וּתְשׁוּבוּ וַתַּחֲלִלוּ אֶת־שְׁמִי וַתְּשׁוּבוּ אִישׁ אֶת־עַבְדּוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶת־שִׁפְחָתוֹ אֲשֶׁר־שַׁלַּחְתֶּם חֲפָזִים לְנַפְשָׁם וַתַּכְּבְּשׁוּ אִתְּכֶם לְהִיּוֹת לָכֶם לְעַבְדִּים וּלְשִׁפְחֹת:

Verses 34:17-20: Particularly since the re-enslavement occurred after a covenantal oath ceremony to free them before God in the Temple, God will punish the powerful enslavers by “freeing” them to suffering, death, and humiliation after death.

Jeremiah 34:17	ירמיהו ל"ד:י"ז
Therefore thus says the Lord: “You did not listen to Me, that each man should proclaim liberty to his brother, and each man [liberty] to his neighbor. Behold me as I proclaim liberty for you,” declares the Lord, “to the sword, pestilence, and famine. I will make you into a source of trembling for all earth's kingdoms.”	לְכוּ כֹה־אָמַר ה' אִתְּכֶם לֹא־שָׁמַעְתֶּם אֵלַי לְקַרְאֵי דָרוֹר אִישׁ לְאָחִיו וְאִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ הִנְנִי קֹרֵא לָכֶם דָרוֹר נְאֻם־ה' אֶל־הַתְּרַב־אֶל־הַדְּבָר וְאֶל־הַרְעָב וְנִתְּתִי אֶתְכֶם לְזַעֲזוּהָ לְכָל מַמְלַכּוֹת הָאָרֶץ:

Verses 34:21-22: God will return the departed Babylonians to Jerusalem. They will capture Zedekiah and his court, and complete the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem.

Jeremiah 34:21	ירמיהו ל"ד:כ"א
I [God] will place Judah's king, Zedekiah, and his princes into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of those seeking their lives, and into the hand of the king of Babylon's army who [are presently departed from you.	וְאֶת־צִדְקִיָּהוּ מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה וְאֶת־שָׂרָיו אֶתְּנֶה בְיַד אֹיְבֵיהֶם וּבְיַד מְבַקְשֵׁי נַפְשָׁם וּבְיַד חַיֵּל מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל הַעֲלִים מֵעַלְיָכֶם:

Verses 33:25-26: Just as God will never violate His covenant to govern nature with His laws, so will He never reject the Patriarchs' descendants or King David's descendants as their rulers.

Jeremiah 33:26	ירמיהו ל"ג:כ"ו
Similarly, I [God] will never reject Jacob's offspring or My servant, David, [or fail to] take from [David's] offspring to be rulers for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Indeed, I will return their captivity and have compassion upon them.	גַּם־זָרַע יַעֲקֹב וְיָדוּד עַבְדִּי אֲמַאֵס מִקַּחַת מִזְרַעוֹ מִשְׁלֵיִם אֶל־זָרַע אַבְרָהָם יִשְׁחָק וְיַעֲקֹב כִּי־אָשִׁיב אֶת־שְׁבוּתָם וְרַחֲמֵתִים: