



Bechukotai: Jeremiah 16:19-17:14¹

Jeremiah lived after the Northern Kingdom's fall to Assyria, as Babylon threatened Judah from the north. Facing opposition to his message from nearly all of Judean society after generations of idolatry and immorality, Jeremiah's 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. In the Haftarah's central passage, Jeremiah 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 central passage concludes with three² 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.

The Haftarah and Parashah share themes and language about the virtue and rewards of trusting in God and the woes of abandoning Him.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 16:19-21: God is Jeremiah's stronghold in times of trouble. One day, nations around the world will come to God, and be astonished at their false and useless 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 at time[s] 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 ומצוני ומנוסי ביום צרה אליך גוים יבאו מאפסי-ארץ ויאמרו אף-שקר נחלו אבותינו תבל ואי-יבם מועיל:

Verses 17:1-2: In the meantime, however, Judah's hearts, altars, and hills are permanently devoted to idolatry.

Jeremiah 17:1	ירמיהו י"ז:א
Judah's sin is written with an iron pen and with the point of a diamond ³ . It is graven upon their heart's tablet, and upon your altars' horns.	ספאת יהודה כתובה בעט ברזל בנקל בצפרן שמיר חרושה על-לוח לבם ולקרנות מזבחותיכם:

Verses 17:3-4: Furious, God will therefore destroy Judah, its power, and wealth, and banish them to a foreign land where they will serve enemies they do not know.

Jeremiah 17:4	ירמיהו י"ז:ד
You will be released, on your own, from 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 מנחלתך אשר נתתי לך וסעבדתיה את-איביך בארץ אשר לא-ידעת כי-אש קדחתם באפי עד-עולם תוקד: (ס)

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

² Verse 12's connection to the overall message of this passage is unclear; see comments of Rashi and Ibn Ezra for more.

³ Exact translation of this mineral is uncertain.

Verses 17:5-8: Those who trust man are accursed and weak even when times are good. Those who trust in God are blessed and strong and flourish even in bad times.

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 בְּה' וְהָיָה ה' מִבְּטָחוֹ:

Verses 17:9-10: Though deceitful mortals 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 ⁴ , to give [each] man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.	אֲנִי ה' חֹקֵר לֵב בִּתְנוּן וְקִלְיוֹת וְלִמְתָּ לְאִישׁ כְּדַרְכּוֹ [כְּדַרְכָּיו] כְּפָרְיוֹ מִפְּרִי מַעֲלָלָיו: (ס)

Verses 17:11-13: Three statements about trust in God: 1) God will punish unjustly earned wealth. 2) The Temple Mount is God's throne on earth. 3) Those who abandon God shall be ashamed since God is Israel's hope.

Jeremiah 17:11	ירמיהו י"ז:יא
As a partridge sits on [many] eggs yet does not hatch them [all], so is he who gets wealth illegally: he shall abandon [his wealth] at midlife, and shall be a fool at his [life's] end.	כַּגִּידָה דָגַר וְלֹא יֵלֵד עֹשֶׂה עֵשֶׂר וְלֹא בְּמִשְׁפֵּט בְּחֻצֵי יָמוֹ [נְמִיּוֹ] יַעֲזֹבֵנוּ וַיִּבְאַחַר יָתוֹ וְהָיָה נֶבֶל:

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 וְאִנְשָׁעָה כִּי תִהְלֵתִי אִתָּה:

Connection

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 overturns it, as (Jer. 17:6) said, 'He shall be like a plant in the desert, which does not sense the coming of good. It dwells in scorched places of the wilderness, in a barren, inhabitable land.' 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...הנה אומר, כל שחכמתו מרבה ממעשיו, למה הוא דומה, לאילן שענפיו מרבים ושרשיו מעטין, והרוח באה ועוקרתו והופכתו על פניו, שנאמר (ירמיה יז) והיה כענף בערבה ולא יראה כי 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 שבועולם באות ונושבות בו אין מזיזין אותו מקומו, שנאמר (שם) והיה כעץ שתול על מים ועל יובל ישלח שרשיו ולא יראה כי יבא חם, והנה עלהו רענון, ובשנת בצורת לא ידאג, ולא ימיש מעשות פרי:

⁴ The kidneys and heart are seats of thought in the Bible.