



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf
“He was the perfect child”*

For most of his life, Jeremiah lived a tortured and painful existence. For as long as he could remember he felt compelled to speak out against injustice and evil. Some people laughed at him; others persecuted him for his seemingly self-righteous attitude. Yet nothing stopped Jeremiah from giving expression to the will and word of God. His criticism of his people did not mean that he hated his people. In fact, the more he criticized them and threatened them with destruction, the more pain he felt. He could see what no one else saw: that his beloved people were on a path of self-destruction which would ultimately bring down the fury of the new empire in the North on the people of Judah.

For almost four decades, from the end of the reign of Josiah (637 BCE) until the destruction of the Temple (586 BCE), Jeremiah spoke out and gave expression to the word of God. Whether he was in the market place or the presence of the king, he did not hold back. He could no more withhold his criticism than he could cease being a member of God's people. This was his mission and the very purpose of his life.

Unlike most Haftorot, this passage is not directly related to the weekly Torah portion. It is the first of three “Haftorot of Admonition” which we read in the weeks between the Seventeenth of Tammuz and the Ninth of Av. This three week period is referred to as the weeks *Bein Ha-M'tzarim*, “The three weeks between the straights.” The outer wall of Jerusalem was breached on the seventeenth of Tammuz and the Temple was finally destroyed on the ninth of Av. These weeks are a time of semi-mourning, which culminates with the great fast of Av when we mourn the destruction not only of the first but the second Temple as well. The Haftorot of Admonition encourage us to use this time for serious self-reflection and repentance.

Jeremiah 1:4 - 10

The word of the Lord came to me: “Before I created you in the womb I selected you; before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet concerning the nations.” I replied, “Ah, Lord God! I don't know how to speak for I am still a boy.” And the Lord said to me: “Do not say ‘I am still a boy,’ for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord.” The Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth and the Lord said to me. “Herewith I put my words into your mouth. See I appoint you this day over nations and kingdoms to uproot and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Exodus 3:10 -12, 4:15

“Come, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free my people, the Israelites, from Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt? And He said, “I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I that sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt you shall worship God at this mountain. “You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth – I will be with you and with him as you speak and tell both of you what to do.”

Isaiah 6:5 – 7

And I cried, “Woe is me; I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. Yet my own eyes have beheld the Lord, king of hosts.” Then one of the Seraphs flew over to me with a live coal which he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched it to my lips and declared, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt shall depart and your sin shall be purged away.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Who shall I send? Who will go for us?” I said, “Here I am; send me!”

Pesikta Rabbati, 26:1 -2 (*An early medieval Midrash on Jewish festivals*)

Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee" (Jeremiah. 1:5). That is, even before I formed you in the belly of your mother, I designated you to prophesy to My people. In answer, Jeremiah spoke right up to the Holy One: Master of the universe, I cannot prophesy to them. What prophet ever came before them whom they did not seek to slay? When You set up Moses and Aaron over them to act in their behalf, did they not wish to stone them? When You set up the curly-haired Elijah over them to act in their behalf, they mocked and ridiculed him, saying, "Look how he frizzes his locks, this fancy-haired fellow." And when You set up Elisha over them to act in their behalf, they said derisively to him, "Go away, baldhead! go away, baldhead!" (2 Kings 2:23). Besides, I cannot venture forth in Israel's behalf, because "I don't know how to speak, for I am still a child" (Jer. 1:6). The divine spirit replied, "Is it not because you are a child that I love you?" For Jeremiah had not as yet tasted the savor of sin.

The Relevance of the Prophets, by R. B. Y. Scott, Page 95

Jeremiah, the shy and sheltered youth found himself thrust to the forefront of great events and clothed with authority that terrified even himself. Coupled with his sense of this overwhelming compulsion by the divine will and the divine choice was the prophet's recognition that he had been set apart from other men and consecrated to a task from which there was no release. To be sanctified was to be set apart from Yahweh's use, like an offering in the temple.

The Haftorah Commentary, by Gunther Plaut Page 412

How can it be said that even before he was born Jeremiah was destined to be a prophet? ...the call to Jeremiah may thus be seen to express both predetermination and freedom: the child was born with particular gifts and a high degree of religious sensitivity. But giving his life to a pursuit of the divine call – with all its rewards, difficulties and dangers – was a decision that Jeremiah had to make for himself. The possibilities of prophecy may therefore be said to have been a divine gift; while being and living as a prophet were his own choice.

Rashi: 1:5

"Before I was fashioned in the womb" - From the time of the first human being, the Holy One showed Adam each generation and its leaders. The word *etzorkhah* comes from the word *tzurah*, form or pattern.

King Assurbanipal of Mesopotamia, (668 -621 B.C.E.)

I am Assurbanipal, offspring of Assur and Belit...whose name Assur and Sin, the lord of the tiara, have named for the kingship from earliest days, whom they formed in his mother's womb, for rulership of Assyria. (Rassam Cylinder Col. 1)

The Egyptian god, Amun, to the pharaoh, Pianchi (751-730 B.C.E.)

(*Recorded on a Stele*) It was in the belly of your mother that I said concerning you that you were to be the ruler of Egypt; it was as seed and while you were in the egg that I knew you, that I knew you were to be the Lord.

Questions to Ponder

1. Compare the three passages above, from Exodus, Isaiah and Jeremiah in which God calls on individuals to assume a prophetic role. What elements do they have in common? How are they different from one another?
2. In each case what reason does the individual give for his reluctance to assume his destined position? How does God answer each of them?
3. At what point in his life do you think Jeremiah wrote these words – early in his career as a prophet or much later when he had a chance to look back at his life experiences? What difference might this make in how we understand what Jeremiah is trying to tell us?
4. Compare the statement by Jeremiah with the Assyrian and Egyptian statements uncovered by archeologists. What insight might they give us in understanding why the prophet made this statement and what he had in mind? How does Jeremiah's reluctance authenticate his prophecy?

5. Jeremiah's claim that he was destined to become a prophet suggests that he did not have control over his own fate. Do people determine how they wish to live and shape their lives? To what extent do we each have a destiny that we must play out in our lives?
6. Have you ever felt called to fulfill some big task that frightened and intimidated you? What was it like to feel a sense of obligation – did it come from within or was it a response to external factors? How did you respond? Do you believe that each of us was placed in this world for some special purpose? If so, how do we discern what our mission or purpose is? Can a person reject their own destiny?

Torah Table Talk

is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center on Long Island, New York. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org. To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org. To see an archive of sermons and TTT go to <http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>

*“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*