

Torah Table Talk
Sin, Guilt, and Return:
Reflections “Between the Breaches”
 Parshat Mas’ei
 Numbers 33:1 – 36:13 / Jeremiah 2:4 – 28
 Sephardic 4:1-2 / Ashkenazic 3:4



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

According to Professor Michael Fishbane, the second ‘Haftorah of Admonition’ read during the three weeks before the ninth of Av contains, “a scathing indictment of national faithlessness, ingratitude, and apostasy addressed to the house of Jacob and to the families of the house of Israel.” (The JPS Bible Commentary Haftorot, Page 262) Composed during the final decades before the destruction of the temple, Jeremiah paints a dark picture of the religious and social life the Judeans. In a series of accusations the prophet claims that the priests, teachers, kings and even the prophets are guilty of rebellion against God. Their guilt is so deep that it can never be washed away. Speaking in the name of God he asks: “What wrong did your fathers find in Me that they abandoned me?”

The twenty one days between the seventeenth of *Tammuz* and *Tisha B’av* are commonly called *bein Hameitzarim*, the weeks between the breaches. On the seventeenth of Tammuz the outer wall of Jerusalem was breached by the Babylonians and on the ninth of Av the Temple was destroyed and the people exiled from their land. We listen to the admonition of the prophets with the hope that we might learn lessons from Israel’s wrong doings. In the spirit of Lamentations (another book attributed to Jeremiah) we say: “Let us search and examine our ways and turn back to the Lord.” It is interesting to note that the final verse of this Haftorah differs in the Ashkenazic and the Sephardic traditions. Since a biblical passage should never end on a dark or foreboding tone, verses are taken from subsequent chapters with which to conclude the Haftorah. Different verses were chosen in each tradition highlighting different themes from the Haftorah.

Jeremiah 3:4 (Ashkenazic tradition)

Just now you called to me, “Father! You are the companion of my youth.”

Jeremiah 4:1-2 (Sephardic tradition)

If you return to me O Israel, declares the Lord, if you return to Me; if you remove your abomination from my presence and do not waver, and swear, “as the Lord lives,” in sincerity, justice and righteousness – nations shall bless themselves by and praise themselves by you.

Michael Fishbane The JPS Bible Commentary Haftorot, Page 263-4

Following the denunciation, liturgical tradition appends a positive ending. Ashkenazic custom reads Jeremiah 3:14 as a counterpoint. The divine statement that the people have now turned to Him and “called to Me, Father” reverses the previous acclamation of wood as “My father.” The terminology signals a return to the divine patrimony and a forthright assertion of loyalty.

Sephardic tradition follows a different course, articulating conditions for divine blessing. Hence, repentance is still an option – nothing concrete has changed. Four stages are marked off: a return to God, a rejection of idolatry, and affirmation of resolve, and an oath of loyalty. The sequence makes clear that religious transformation is a process, involving decision and resolve at each point. Such a scenario anticipates a later Jewish tradition formulated by Saadiah Gaon and Maimonides, whereby repentance goes through several stages – including the need to divest oneself of negative practices and become firm in this resolve.

The Prophets, Abraham Joshua Heschel

Man's love of God is among the earliest expressions of biblical religion...In the words of Isaiah 41:8 God speaks of Abraham as "My friend." In Deuteronomy Benjamin is called "the friend of the Lord."Israel calls to God, "My father, thou art the friend of My youth (aluph ne'uri)" Jeremiah 3:4. Such a relationship seemed inconceivable to the mind of a think like Aristotle, who held that friendship involved equality. "This is evident from cases where there is a wide disparity between two persons in respect of virtue, or vice or wealth or anything else; for such persons neither are nor expect to be friends. It is most clearly seen in our relationship with the gods. According to Aristotle there is no friendship of man with God. "For friendship," he maintains, "exists only where there can be a return of affection, but friendship toward God does not admit of love being returned, nor at all of loving. For it would be strange if one were to say that he loved Zeus."

Genesis 12:2 -3

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.

Questions to Ponder

1. How do the verses in chapter three and four of Jeremiah help to change the tone of the Haftorah? These two verses are taken out of their original context. Why do you think the sages who set the parameters of the Haftorot chose to remove these verses from their actual context? Did they change the original meaning of the verses by doing this (look at each verse in context).
2. These two verses each speak about a different type of spiritual renewal. Chapter three focuses on reestablishing a relationship, "a friendship," with God while chapter four focuses on repentance by forsaking evil and renewing ones commitment to the essential values of ones faith. How important are each of these elements in helping a person change his character?
3. Can we truly be "friends" with God? What would Aristotle have to say about this? Why do you think the bible would disagree with him?
4. What is the connection between the verse in chapter four in Jeremiah and God's promise to Abraham? In what ways do we become a blessing to the other nations of the world when we embrace the teachings of Abraham?
5. How does this Haftorah set a tone for the weeks prior to Tisha B'Av. The emphasis on sin and guilt in this Haftorah would suggest that we are responsible for our own suffering? Is this a healthy attitude? How else should we respond to exile, destruction and suffering in Jewish history?

Torah Table Talk

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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."*