

Torah Table Talk
Engraved in the Flesh:
God's Constant Reminder of Love
 Parshat Eikev
 Deuteronomy 7:12 – 11:25
 Isaiah 49:14 – 51:3



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

In the second Haftorah of Consolation we find a series of rhetorical questions to which God makes pronouncements of comfort and hope of restoration. The people of Israel feel as if God has abandoned them. The prophet tells the people that God can no more abandon Israel than a mother can abandon her child. Using a series of powerful metaphors, the prophet compares the relationship between God and Israel to a parent and a child, as well as a husband and a wife. God's transcendent power will allow Israel to overcome her exile and despair. Israel, however, must be willing to place her trust in God. God asks Israel: 'Is my arm, then, too short to rescue? Have I not the power to save?'

In the end the prophet reassures Israel and encourages the nation to look to Her ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, for encouragement. Our Abraham began as one but became a great nation. So too, the Jewish people shall become a great nation. "Her wilderness shall become like Eden and Her desert like the garden of the Lord." Reading these words it is hard not to think about the miracles of modern Israel. The anonymous prophet in the second half of Isaiah was truly one of the earliest Zionist visionaries.

Isaiah 49:14-16

Zion says: "Adonai has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." Can a woman forget her baby or disown the child of her womb? Though these might forget, I could never forget you. See I have engraved you on the palms of My hands, Your walls are ever before Me.

Lamentations 5:20

Why do you forget us for ever, and forsake us for so long?

Lamentations 2:11 – 12

My eyes are spent with tears, my bowels are troubled, my liver is poured upon the earth, because of the destruction of the daughter of my people; because the children and the babies faint in the streets of the city. They say to their mothers, where is grain and wine, when they faint like wounded men in the streets of the city, when their soul was poured out on their mothers' bosom.

Babylonian Talmud Berachot 32a

"Can a woman forget her sucking child (*ullah*)?" (Isaiah 49:15). By which the Holy One meant: Can I possibly forget the [burnt offerings](#) (*olah*) of rams you brought Me in the wilderness? Israel replied: Master of the universe, since there is no forgetfulness before the throne of Your glory, You will probably not forget my making the golden calf. The Holy One replied, "*These shall be forgotten*" (Isaiah 49:15). Your saying to the images of the golden calf, "*These are thy gods, O Israel*" (Exodus 32:4), shall be forgotten. The congregation of Israel spoke up: Master of the universe, since there is forgetfulness before the throne of glory, will You perhaps forget my instant obedience at Mount Sinai? God replied: Your response to the "I" in "I am the Lord thy God" (Exodus 20:2), I shall not forget.

Michael Fishbane The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftorot

I have engraved you: God has engraved the image of Zion upon His palms, as a constant memorial. The bold anthropomorphic figure was later softened by the qualification “as if” (Targum, Rashi; Kimchi) or by understanding *kapayim* (palms) as “clouds.” (Cf. Job 36:32; R. Sa’adia Gaon and Rashi) Ibn Ezra rejects this view on the basis of the parallel phrase and interprets the figure as an expression of God’s constant remembrance of Zion. Regarding body engravings, the prophet elsewhere says that a devotee may mark God’s arm on his arm to signify allegiance. (Isaiah 44:5)

Isaiah 44:5

One shall say, I am the Lord’s; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall write on his hand The Lord’s, and surname himself by the name of Israel.

Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 4a

On another occasion the congregation of Israel asked for something not suitable for her, when she said to Him: Master of the universe, "set me as a seal upon Your heart, as a seal upon Your arm" (Song of Songs 8:6). The Holy One replied: My daughter, you ask for something that is seen at times and not seen at other times. (Because it is covered by clothing) But I will do something for you that is seen at all times: "Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands" (Isaiah 49:16).

Questions to Ponder

1. How do Isaiah’s prophecies appear to be a response to the book of Lamentations? How does Isaiah react to the destruction of the Temple? In what way is the exile a theological crisis for the Jewish people?
2. Isaiah frames God’s proclamations around a series of questions? What is the answer to the question which the prophet asks above? Can a woman ever forget her own child? What does this question tell us about the relationship between God and Israel?
3. Have you ever felt as if God had forgotten you? If so, when? How did this make you feel? Did God forget the Jewish people during the Holocaust?
4. In what sense is Israel engraved upon the ‘hand of God?’ What do you think Isaiah had in mind when he made this statement? How is the original verse different from the Midrash in Ta’anit above?
5. Given the fact that tattoos are taboo in the Jewish tradition, why would Isaiah use such an image to explain the relationship between God and the Jewish people/Zion? What does the verse from Isaiah tell us about tattoos?
6. In what way can Tefillin be compared to the engraving upon one’s hand? When a person puts on Tefillin and looks at the hand section of this ritual object wrapped around the palm of his hand what does he/she see? Why is the engraving upon God’s hand more powerful than the seal upon God’s heart in biblical poetry according to the Midrash above?

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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*

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