



PROBING

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THE PROPHETS

The semi-mourning period of “Bein Ham’tzarim”, the three weeks that precede Tish’a B’av, sets the tone for haftarah readings of the next few Shabbatot. Fittingly, the first of these haftarot, the one which we read this Shabbat, is taken from the opening perek of Sefer Yirmiyahu, the prophet known as the “n’vi hachurban”, the one who prophesied of-and lived through-the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile.

The selection tells of Hashem’s call to Yirmiyahu to serve as G-d’s agent to the people and the prophet’s reluctance to accept that mission because, as he himself argues, he is but a young man and, therefore, an inexperienced orator. After reassuring Yirmiyahu that He would protect him, Hashem sets forth the prophet’s mission “to uproot, to crush, to destroy and demolish,” referring to the navi’s charge to warn the nation of the punishments that await them, but also “to build and to plant”, a reference to the accompanying mission of comforting the nation with the promise of a future return.

Yirmiyahu begins his service to G-d and to the people during the reign of the righteous king Yoshiyahu, a time of relative peace and political stability. It was a time that followed the flight of the powerful Assyrian army from Yerushalayim, an event foreseen by the navi Yishayahu, and,

within five years, the discovery of a Sefer Torah in the Bet HaMikdash, would lead to a national teshuva movement inspired by the King himself. It seemed as it was a near perfect time with political stability and high moral behavior.

These warnings are what fill this first perek - a perek that closes with G-d’s reassurance

But Yirmiyahu perceived how the people’s “return” to G-d was merely superficial and was simply a façade. It was under these conditions that Yirmiyahu begins his prophetic calling with the visions of the almond branch and then the bubbling pot facing north. Both visions predicted that the “simmering” threat would soon arrive from the north. But the prophet’s condemnation of the people’s behavior and his warnings of divine punishment fell on deaf ears to a nation who had just recently escaped the Assyrian threat through Hashem’s intervention. How then could anyone claim that G-d is angry with them and that they are liable for punishment?

So they ignored Yirmiyahu’s warnings.

But more than merely ignoring their navi, the people grew to despise him. We

can only imagine today how we would feel if a person would appear and declare that, chas v'shalom, we would all be thrown out of our land and our nation lose her independence! We would first ignore him and then get angry with him and, eventually, revile him.

Which is what happened to Yirmiyahu.

And these warnings are what fill this first perek - a perek that closes with G-d's reassurance to the prophet that He would protect him and grant him the strength to stand up to the Kings and princes, the Kohanim and all the people who will oppose him and fight against him.

Our sages, however, chose NOT to close the haftarah with these harsh predictions and this negative portrayal of the people. Rather, they included the first three p'sukim of the following chapter, perek bet. There we read words of hope and promise - words that are familiar to us from our Rosh HaShana tefillot - about how Hashem remembers us fondly when recalling the early years, when we followed Him faithfully through the desert. Despite the harsh messages he will deliver to Israel, Yirmiyahu reassures the people that G-d still loves them and wishes their return to Him.

As the very final pasuk explains, Hashem considers Israel as holy to Him, the first of His grain and, therefore all those who attempt to "devour" her will find evil befalling them.

G-d seeks to repair Israel but never to reject them. ■

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