

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Kol Rinah  
Parashat Pinchas  
July 30, 2016 / 24 Tammuz 5776

On the First Haftarah of Admonition

<sup>1</sup> *The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin.* <sup>2</sup> *The word of the Lord came to him in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign,* <sup>3</sup> *and throughout the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, when Jerusalem went into exile in the fifth month.*

<sup>4</sup> *The word of the Lord came to me:*

<sup>5</sup> *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.*

<sup>6</sup> *I replied:*

*Ah, Lord God!  
I don't know how to speak,  
For I am still a boy.*

<sup>7</sup> *And the Lord said to me:*

*Do not say, "I am still a boy,"  
But go wherever I send you  
And speak whatever I command you.*

<sup>8</sup> *Have no fear of them,*

*For I am with you to deliver you*

*--declares the Lord—*

I love these words, these opening words of Jeremiah. I love them because of their plain-spokenness, their simplicity. There's only one phrase that perhaps needs a little elucidation—"I appointed you a prophet concerning the nations." But I'm not elucidating this morning. There are not big words. There are not big sentences. There are not fancy metaphors; there are no metaphors. Just straight speech.

I love these words because they answer for Jeremiah and provoke in us three questions. What is my purpose? Am I ready? What if I fail?

God tells Jeremiah that he had a purpose even before he was born—to be a chosen, holy, prophet, a person through whom God will speak, through whom God's voice will emanate.

What is your purpose? Was it clear when you were a child? Has it become more clear or less clear? Our purpose may change over time; or our understanding may change. And we need not only have one purpose. We could also ask, "what is my role in my family?" "What is

my role in my synagogue?” What is my role in my workplace? What is my role in electing the person I think should become president? What is my role in making my community more just and fair?

Jeremiah responds to God that he does not know how to speak, “For I am still a boy,” he says. Jeremiah is asking God, “Am I ready?”

When are you still a boy, a girl, a child? In what situations, what contexts, what moments, are you still wonderstruck? When do you feel unprepared and inadequate? When it comes to doing things that matter, to speaking words that matter, can or should we ever feel completely at ease, completely comfortable? Should we not always feel hesitant, unready, unprepared? And when should that stop us?

We will never be ready to do something until we’ve already done it. And if we’ve already done it, enough and completely, then it doesn’t need doing anymore. We can never be completely ready.

And God knows that Jeremiah is worried about failing, about people not listening. What are you worried about failing at? What are the consequences of failure? Is it better to fail or not to try?

If we put these three questions together, we ask ourselves, “What is our purpose in life, are we ready to take it on, and what happens if we fail?”

Jeremiah has an awesome, huge, critical, and ultimately impossible purpose—to convince the Israelite people to repent, to convince Israelite kings to repent, and to prevent the destruction of the Temple and exile of the nation.

For that job, he gets assurance from God.

Whether because our purposes are less huge, or less impossible, or because God no longer speaks as clearly to us, or because we no longer understand God as clearly, we are without the divine reassurances that comfort, support and sustain Jeremiah.

And in the end, even God’s reassurances, support, and sustenance do not make Jeremiah successful.

So without them, we can expect to do no worse than Jeremiah.

As we begin musaf, find or remind yourself of your purpose, your roles, the work you have to do, the work you have left before you. Ask yourself if you are ready to be unready? And ask yourself what the consequence is of failure.