

Rare, But Well Done

Parshat Tzav, 5782

For those calendar nerds out there, this week's Haftarah is among the rarest ever read. By way of background, the way the Jewish calendar works, Parshat Tzav typically coincides with one of the special haftarot read around this time of year. In leap years, it is either the Shabbos before or after Purim, which is always Shabbos Zachor, which has a special Haftarah.. The Shabbos after Purim is usually Parshas Parah, which also has a special Haftarah. When it is Shabbos Hagadol, there is yet another special Haftarah. Parshas Parah is also the Shabbos before Parshas Hachodesh, which is always the Shabbos before Rosh Chodesh Nissan- unless it falls *on* Rosh Chodesh Nissan. Since that is the case this year, and Pesach also falls on Shabbos, we have an extra Shabbos after Purim. Is everyone still confused? Just to give you an idea of how rare this is, the actual Haftarah for Tzav is read in approximately 13% of instances that this Parsha is read. The last time this happened was in 2019, and the next time it happens will be in 2043!

Given how special an occasion this is, you may be wondering what special message was reserved for this occasion. Let me tell you, it is a doozy. It features a portion from the seventh Chapter of Yirmiyahu, a man whose prophecies are so relentlessly depressing that the word "Jeremiad," defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "a long, mournful complaint or lamentation; a list of woes" is part of the lexicon. Our haftarah is no exception. Let me read you a few choice passages:

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל־זִבְחֵיכֶם סָפוּ עַל־זִבְחֵיכֶם וְאִכְלוּ בָּשָׂר:

It was delivered at the entrance to the Beit HaMikdash to thronged multitudes who were bringing their sacrifices there. Just a mile or so away, in the Hinnom Valley, the Judeans were sacrificing their children to the idol Molech¹. Yirmiyahu tells them that their manifold failings- religious, social and moral- render their sacrifices repulsive to God, and that the Jewish people might as well eat them.

וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְלֹא הִטּוּ אֶת־אָזְנוֹם וַיִּקְשׁוּ אֶת־עַרְפֹּם הֲרָעוּ מֵאֲבוֹתָם:

They would not listen to Me or give ear. They stiffened their necks, they acted worse than their fathers.

וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי מִמֶּעַרֵי יְהוּדָה וּמִחֻצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם קוֹל שְׂשׂוֹן וְקוֹל שְׂמִמָּה קוֹל סִתָּן וְקוֹל כְּלָה כִּי לְחַרְבָּה תִּהְיֶה הָאָרֶץ:

In a reversal of the words we sing to a bride and groom, God promises that he will render Jerusalem desolate, and remove joy and celebration, especially of weddings, from the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem.

When our sages established the reading of the Haftarah, they made sure that the weekly and holiday selections never ended on a depressing note. If ever that happened, the final verse would be repeated, or additional verses from elsewhere would be added. An example of the former is the Haftarah that is more commonly read on Parshat Tzav, the Haftarah for Shabbat HaGadol- where the penultimate verse, describing the arrival of the prophet

¹ See Rabbi Barry Kornblau and Zach Beer's Haftarah Helper for a more extensive treatment, and from which this description is derived.

■ [Haftarah Helper- Tzav \(1\).pdf](#)

Eliyahu, is repeated because of the dire warning of the last verse, threatening death and destruction for those who do not heed his message. But this Haftarah is an example of the latter, where additional verses are added on. But if you look at which verses were selected, they are far from optimistic. Instead, it is just more trenchant rebuke.

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲכָמֵיכֶם בְּחִכְמָתוֹ וְאֱלֹהֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל הַגְּבוּר בַּגְּבוּרָתוֹ אֱלֹהֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עָשִׂיר בְּעֵשְׂרוֹ:

Thus said the LORD:

Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom;

Let not the strong man glory in his strength;

Let not the rich man glory in his riches.

What sort of optimistic ending is this?

I'd like to suggest that even in the midst of his gloomiest prophecies, Yirmiyahu was acknowledging that- prophets aside- we never really know how things are going to turn out. Rather than being depressing, this is one of the most optimistic messages we could ever hope to learn. It is easy to look at a woefully unredeemed world, where there is endlessly depressing news, and think that it will always be this way. When we are in dire situations, we are *sure* nothing will change, and when things *are* good, we are certain *everything* will change. The answer to both of these perspectives is, "Don't be so smart." Do you feel God is saying *עולותיכם ספוי* - that he is rejecting your prayers, that which you offer up to him? It won't

always be that way. Do you feel alienated from God? Do you feel **וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְלֹא הִטּוּ אֶת־אָזְנָם** and **וַיִּקְשׁוּ אֶת־עַרְפֹּתָם**, that you aren't listening to him, that you are stuck in a negative behavior pattern that you can't seem to break? That is not permanent. Do you get the sense that joy is missing from your life, that your relationships, especially the closest and most intimate ones, are not healthy, productive or even existent- that God has **וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי מִמֵּעַרְי יְהוּדָה וּמִחֲצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם קוֹל** that God has **שָׁשׂוֹן וְקוֹל שְׂמֵחָה קוֹל חֲתָן וְקוֹל כַּלָּה**? That, too, is no guarantee of future performance. Your intelligence, your money, your power- nothing grants you the ability to skip to the last page of the book of your life, and nothing should give you the certainty to know how things will end in the confusing world in which we live. All we can do is **וידוע אותי השכל** try and appreciate and understand that Hashem runs the world, even if it is in a way we cannot understand and have difficulty accepting. No wonder this Haftarah, whenever it is read, always falls between Purim and Pesach. The mark of these two days of redemption, always a month apart on the calendar, is swift and unpredicted redemption from a seemingly intractable set of circumstances. As Reb Nachman of Breslov (appropriately enough, in Ukraine) regularly said - **אין שום יאוש בעולם כלל** - there is no room for unrelieved despair in this world.

This week's Haftarah may be rare, but it certainly is well done- and its lesson is always relevant. May we take it to heart, and may we see its true message be actualized in our lives, soon.