

Haftarah – Rosh HaShana 2nd Day – Jeremiah 31:2-20

Shanah Tovah! I am going to say a few words about today's haftarah, which is from Chapter 31 of the book of Jeremiah. Before getting into this specific prophecy, I wanted to learn and share a bit about the historical Jeremiah – I certainly had heard of him and had seen his name in the Bible during Hebrew school and services but that is all I knew. In 1971, the band Three Dog Night came out with the song *Joy to the World* which includes the lyric “Jeremiah was a bullfrog - Was a good friend of mine - I never understood a single word he said”. But that song was mostly nonsensical and Jeremiah, our prophet, was definitely not a bullfrog. At least the song was honest about not understanding what he said.

Jeremiah lived through the Babylonian exile and the destruction of the first Temple. Unquestionably a difficult time. And his many prophecies against the behavior of the Jews of his era – greed, idolatry and false prophets – and impending divine judgment – did not endear him to many people. He even got himself thrown into a cistern and after rescue ended up in Egypt, just a little reminiscent of Joseph's path.

In his prophecy captured in today's haftarah, Jeremiah tells the people that even after sending them to exile because of their sins, God still cares about them and will bring them back from exile. He uses extensive familial imagery – the love of a parent for a child.

For example, in this chapter, God hears Rachel weeping inconsolably for

her children, and he comforts her. God also hears Ephraim – the name is used for the northern kingdom that was exiled – and describes Ephraim as “my firstborn”. While God scattered Israel, after hearing Ephraim’s remembrance of misdeeds and repentance, he will also “gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock.”

The theme of God’s love for his people and repentance and return is repeated more than once. For example, Ephraim says “thou has chastised me, and I was chastised, as a calf untrained; turn thou me, and I shall be turned, for thou are the Lord my God. Surely after that I was turned, I repented.” The haftarah ends with an expression of God’s love for his child and forgiveness – something we said in the Zikhronot prayer yesterday at the bottom of page 269 in our Machzorim - you can look for it when we get there today. “Is not Ephraim My precious? My beloved child? Even when I reproach him, I remember him with tenderness. My heart yearns for him. Surely I shall show him mercy, says the Lord.”

In the words of Rachel Khan-Troster, “[i]n never abandoning Ephraim, God understands the fact that we are imperfect and need the opportunity to change. No divine decision is final. Usually in the prayer, it is we who express our own imperfection. But here we have an explanation of honesty from God. God knows we are imperfect, and God still trusts.”

Let us all find tshuvah this high holiday season.

Shana tovah u’metuka.