

# Rosh Hashana Haftorah Talk 2025 by Rich Cohen

Today's Haftorah from the prophet Jeremiah is almost unflinchingly optimistic:

"The people escaped from the sword found favor in the wilderness."

"I will build you firmly again, O Maiden Israel!"

"I will turn their mourning to joy. I will comfort them and cheer them in their grief."

All this positivity is counter to and in dramatic contrast to the pessimism of so much of the Book of Jeremiah. His prophecies are among the most stark and darkly gloomy in all of biblical literature. They were aimed as a rebuke to the Israelites who in Jeremiah's estimation had surrendered to idolatry and depravity.

Quotes:

I will weep and wail for the mountains and take up a lament concerning the desert pastures. They are desolate and untraveled, and the lowing of cattle is not heard.

The birds of the air have fled and the animals are gone.

The anger of the Lord will not turn back until He has executed and accomplished the intents of His mind.

The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who shall know it?

Now therefore amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the LORD

your God, and the LORD will repent of the evil which he has pronounced against

you. Here

Indeed Jeremiah lived in a time of deep upheaval in Jewish history. He witnessed the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE and the exile of the Jewish people to Babylonia. Much of the book of Jeremiah is a lengthy tirade against the people for their faithlessness and ominous warnings of the destruction to come if they do not mend their ways. Such complaints and lamentations, from which the modern term jeremiad, defined as a prolonged lamentation or prophetic warning against the evil habits of a nation, is derived, reflected real consequences in the life of Jeremiah. He was scorned by the people to whom he preached, arrested, beaten, and left in a pit. The last ruler of Judah, King Zedekiah, had him imprisoned for prophesying the fall of Jerusalem. Eventually Jeremiah was exiled to Egypt where he eventually died.

Yet today's Haftorah passages are unceasingly optimistic, positive, and joyful. Why is that the case? I went to my most ubiquitous professor, Dr. Artificial intelligence, who reminded me of the obvious, that there is always a connection between the Torah reading and the Haftorah passages.. What is that connection today? Here it is: In the Torah reading, the binding of Isaac, that is the Akedah, the reading highlights a moment of G-d's intervention, saving Isaac from death at the last minute. The Haftorah

from Jeremiah, with its message of hope for ultimate redemption, serves as a powerful parallel, framing the day's readings around Gd's saving hand and the promise of a future restoration.

Can there be any other explanation for the positivity of this Haftorah of Jeremiah, or even a message for us today? I suggest to you two thoughts.

First, we are at the beginning of a New Year. New beginnings should be marked by optimism and hope, a posture taken in great measure by Jeremiah's Rosh Hashana Haftorah. It is a chance to start over again, to change our ways, to right what we have done wrong in the past.

Secondly is a message for today. Many of us are wracked with great anxiety, even despair, over the state of our country in 2025. We see disregard for civil rights and freedoms, disrespect for government institutions and the rule of law and so much more. BUT Jeremiah's times were even worse: the Temple destroyed and the leadership of Israel banished into exile in Babylonia. In this optimistic and comforting Haftorah, I feel that Jeremiah is trying to give us a message for today: that in the long curve of history these difficult times will pass and the rule of law and compassion and respect for our fellow human shall again become ascendent. Let us hope that he is right and further that we shall live long enough to see this modern version of Jeremiah's vision come to pass.