

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : וַי

This week's Haftorah is taken from the Book of Yirmiyohu, Chapter 7, verse 21 till Chapter 8, verse 3 and ends with the two verses 22 and 23 of Chapter 9

1. Yirmiyohu HaNovvi was a Kohen who lived during the turbulent times of the last kings of Israel. He saw the reign and then the tragic death of the righteous Yoshiyohu, the King of the southern Kingdom of Yehudah. He lived through the sieges of Yerushalaim and was witness to the Destruction of the Beis HaMikdash by Nevuchadnetzar, the King of Babylon and the fall of the Jewish State. Yirmiyohu himself experienced first hand the ensuing cruel exile of the Jewish People as they were driven from their country, the Land of Israel, to “weep by the Rivers of Babylon.”
2. The worst of it all was that he had prophesied these events long before they came to pass (Yirmiyohu wrote the prophetic Megillas Eichoh long before the events that it describes had happened) and he constantly warned of the terrible things that were going to happen to the Jewish People if they did not do Teshuvah.
3. But his warnings fell on deaf ears. The people were confident in their own strength and took courage from their alliances with other kings against the ever-growing threat of Babylon, which Yirmiyohu prophesied was ordained to be the stick of HaShem's wrath with which He would beat His errant people. But the powerful ruling classes who chose to go against the Torah, who refused to learn Torah and live by its commandments, who selfishly exploited the poor and who followed cults and idolworship — they branded Yirmiyohu a scaremonger and a “defeatist” and his life was constantly under threat — he was often thrown into the dungeons for proclaiming the word of HaShem.
4. However, Yirmiyohu had a message to proclaim and he was fearless in speaking out. He constantly exhorted the People to return to HaShem and thus save themselves from the impending tragedy. Sadly, to no avail.
5. The Destruction did come about, exactly as foretold by Yirmiyohu. Nevuchadnetzar appointed the righteous Gedalyoh ben Achikkom to be the Governor of the Land, charged with rebuilding Jewish life among the remnants in Judea and ensuring their loyalty to Babylon. But there was an insurrection. Baalis, the king of Ammon, incited Yishmo'el ben Nesanyoh to assassinate Gedalyoh. Fearing the wrath of Nevuchadnetzar the rebels fled to Egypt to escape the impending repercussions of the returning Babylonians and Yirmiyohu was dragged down with them. (He later died at their hands, it is said.) To Yirmiyohu, however, all this tragedy was so much worse, for he had seen it coming and he knew it was all so avoidable! Yirmiyohu constantly tells his listeners that HaShem always beckons to His children to return to Him. If they would but return to a Torah life, they would be spared from His anger. (*See Historical Note.*)
6. Although Yirmiyohu is scathing in his criticism of the wayward Jewish People and his warnings are harsh and fierce, nevertheless after the calamity that he had tried to avert

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had come about it is Yirmiyohu who gives comfort and support to his grieving People. Indeed, his practical advice saves the Jewish People from falling into unrelieved depression; he it is who encourages us never to give up our Torah life. Even as we are in exile, says Yirmiyohu, Jewish life will go on. “Build for yourselves houses, plant fields and vineyards. And seek the welfare of the country where HaShem sends you, for in its peace, you, too, will find peace.”

7. In these words is the clear exhortation, too, that throughout our dispersion amongst the Nations we should — to the best of our abilities and so long as this will not compromise our Torah observance, and, of course, if they will but allow us to — contribute to the wealth, prosperity and progress of our host countries and not to be reclusive nor live in dejected isolation. Because of these words of Yirmiyohu it has come about that whenever they have been permitted to do so, Jewish people have played a prominent part, quite out of proportion to their small numbers, in the development of ideas and devices to the common good of all mankind. Whether it be in the field of medicine, or the sciences, or the arts, or the humanities, or in trade and commerce, or indeed in scholarship and learning and moral guidance and ethics, the Jewish contribution to the world’s civilization continues to benefit all peoples.
8. This week’s Haftorah is one of those dire warnings that made Yirmiyohu so unpopular with the ruling classes — especially when contrasted with the brazen lies of the false prophets who declared that everything was fine and there was no threat. In addition, and to put things in their contemporary context, it was very difficult to imagine that Yerushalaim, this thriving metropolis, could ever be destroyed and desolated, that the imposing Beis HaMikdash should be razed to the ground and that foxes should make their dens there. But Yirmiyohu tells the people that their Korbannos are unacceptable to HaShem because they are empty ritual. (This is the connexion with the Sidra, which teaches of the laws of the Korbannos.) It would be better to eat the meat of the Korbannos than this false piety of burning good meat on the Mizbayach! HaShem has no need for this kind of insincere “service.” Where is the contrition, the repentance?
9. HaShem wants obedience, not sacrifice! He commands obedience to the Torah, to protect the weak and not to exploit the poor and disadvantaged. “When I took you out of Egypt, it wasn’t that you should bring sacrifices to Me! You are My People only by virtue of the Torah and by observing all the Mitzvos of the Torah, by being kind and compassionate.” Deserting the Mitzvos of the Torah leads to all kinds of abominations, even to the worst cruel idolworship. If the People will not return to Torah observance, warns Yirmiyohu, HaShem will cause their great cities and centres of population to be destroyed, with their inhabitants finding no rest in life nor any peace even in death.
10. Don’t take false pride in your own cleverness and achievements and don’t rely on your own prowess and strength, warns Yirmiyohu. Anything a person has is only worth anything if it is used in the service of HaShem, to carry out His commandments. If you are going to be proud, says Yirmiyohu, be proud in this: that you understand and carry out what HaShem wants, namely, to emulate Him in being kind and in doing justice and bringing righteousness to the world — these are the things that I want, says HaShem.