

HAFTARAH EXHORTATIONS: Haftarah Behar-Bechukotai

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Jeremiah 16:19-17:14

“Heart Check”

The concluding two portions of the Book of Leviticus are studied together on leap years, bringing the Holiness Code of Leviticus to a close. Again, we find a direct correlation between obedience and blessings being reiterated, with some specific commandments about the Sabbatical and Jubilee years to be remembered in the Land of Israel. Additionally, the indenture laws are explained so that when obeyed, the tendency for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer does not persist beyond the fifty-year cycles. Finally, after describing various punishments for disobedience, which would cause Israel to be scattered among the nations, some specific instructions about returning to the Promised Land with confession and repentance are detailed. In conclusion, the instructions for funding the sanctuary are listed, and they bring Leviticus to completion.

The Rabbis seemingly chose our Haftarah passage from Jeremiah, because a relationship between obedience and blessing—versus disobedience and cursing—is reiterated by Jeremiah. First in Leviticus 26:3, 14-15 the following “if/then” propositions are stated. The corresponding blessings or curses will follow based on the choices that Israel makes:

“If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out” (Leviticus 26:3).

“But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, *and* so break My covenant” (Leviticus 26:14-15).

Jeremiah makes a similar connection between obedience and blessing, versus disobedience and cursing, but instead describes it in terms of not trusting—versus trusting in the Lord:

“Thus says the LORD, ‘**Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the LORD.** For he will be like a bush in the desert and will not see when prosperity comes, but will live in stony wastes in the wilderness, a land of salt without inhabitant. **Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD and whose trust is the LORD.** For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit” (Jeremiah 17:5-8).

We see some echoes of Jeremiah’s words in Psalm 1, as the Psalmist describes the differences between one who delights in God’s Torah, and the wicked who will be punished:

“How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree *firmly* planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (Psalm 1:1-6).

Recalling this Psalm, which many have committed to memory, is an awesome reminder of the two divergent paths people can take during their lives. A person can obey and trust in God, or a person can chose the strength of his flesh, disobey God, and suffer the attendant consequences. This is a constant theme seen throughout the Holy Scriptures.

This comparative analysis brings us to what is considered the crux of what we encounter in our Haftarah reading from Jeremiah—and in particular, what it says about the heart of sinful humanity. Much soul searching down through the centuries has contemplated the harsh reality of dealing with the deceitfulness of the heart. In the quiet moments of reflection and meditation, when you might be personally examining your own heart—attempting to discern the motivation

for actions you are taking, and being completely honest with yourself—the thought of self-deception must be considered. The Prophet Jeremiah cries out that even he might be healed and saved, lest he has had a heart that was not totally and absolutely turned toward God in everything:

“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds. As a partridge that hatches eggs which it has not laid, so is he who makes a fortune, but unjustly; in the midst of his days it will forsake him, and in the end he will be a fool. A glorious throne on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary. O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake You will be put to shame. Those who turn away on earth will be written down, because they have forsaken the fountain of living water, even the LORD. **Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for You are my praise**” (Jeremiah 17:9-14).

Only our omniscient Creator can categorically search and know an individual heart's intention, to render appropriate judgment to each person. Perhaps during your sanctification process over the years, you have noticed how the motivations of your heart have changed. As you have matured in faith, you have allowed the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you more consistently. You have prayed for yourself to decrease, that the Lord resident in your heart might increase. You have learned to submit your will to the will of the One who is working through you, to accomplish His goals for the Kingdom with your life. You have known that when you have sought out for God's help, that He has been faithful to you and has made it available!

Being totally honest with yourself is always something that is good. Prayerfully considering your actions, asking the Holy Spirit to confirm decisions and choices before you commit, is an excellent way to conduct your life. Reminding yourself that you are trying to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, is something that can indeed keep you on the straight and narrow path—growing in holiness and steadfastness—as you become more like Messiah Yeshua. As Paul wrote the Philippians,

“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, **work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.** Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:12-15).

Did you notice that Paul reminds Believers that God “is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (NRSV)? Believers become children of the Most High with transformed hearts of flesh that are empowered by His Holy Spirit. As the Prophet Ezekiel foretold,

“Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Our heart searching should be something that is quite intimate, as we appeal to the Lord to operate in and through us. As we learn to submit to His promptings, obedience to His ways will come naturally—as the Holy Spirit cannot lead us in a direction that is disobedient or rebellious. *The key is for us to constantly be checking and humbling our hearts.* When thoughts invade from the world, the flesh, or the Devil—that might take us down inappropriate paths—we must be quick to recognize the deviation and cry out to God for His help!

There is probably no more tragic punishment for the Believer than to be separated from the intimacy of the fellowship one can have with the Lord. But if God promised a corporate scattering to Ancient Israel because of their disobedience, He is also prone to turn His face from an individual who follows after the fleshly dictates of a hardening heart.

Brothers and sisters, learn to search your heart often! If you sense a distance between you and the intimacy you should be experiencing with the Holy One—then take Jeremiah's advice,

and plead, beg, implore, beseech, or cry out for healing! Remember He is not only the Healer, **but He seeks to heal**, especially those who fervently ask for His healing. *Ask and you shall receive.*
Until the restoration of all things...

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