

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : מטות

***This week's Haftorah is from Sefer Yirmiyohu,
from Chapter 1 verse 1 till Chapter 2 verse 3.***

1. This is the first of the three “Haftorahs of Rebuke” leading up to the fast of Tisha b’Av, the anniversary of the Destruction of the Beis HaMikdash. As explained in the Introductions to the Sidra of the Week and the Haftorahs, our Chachommim utilized the forum of the Torah Readings and Haftorahs to keep the people informed of the events of the yearly calendar, to prepare the people for anniversaries or up-coming happenings, or indeed to inform them of imminent special days or events. Examples are Rosh Chodesh (when we have a special Maftir and Haftorah about Rosh Chodesh) or the Haftorah that reminds people (in the words of Yonoson to Dovid) that “tomorrow is Rosh Chodesh.” This Haftorah, which is the opening chapter of the Sefer Yirmiyohu, begins the series of warning Haftorahs of the Three Weeks and the Nine Days. As such, there is not any more any real connexion between the Haftorahs and the Sidras of the week. From now on till the end of the Sidras of the Torah, the Haftorahs are connected almost exclusively to the calendar.
2. This is the first prophesy that Yirmiyohu ever experienced and in this chapter is described how Yirmiyohu is appointed to his mission. The world political situation *vis-à-vis* the Jewish People in their Land at this time was worrying. Disaster was in the air; there was a feeling of foreboding, of unease, of impending doom as mighty kings made threatening noises towards the Jewish homeland. (It has always been so strategically situated so as to make it important to any empire builder.) In their heart of hearts the Jewish People knew, and their Torah leaders repeatedly told them, that world events would affect them for good or for ill in direct relation to their spiritual level. Those people who were generally loyal to the teachings of the Torah, took the warnings of the Torah leaders seriously and tried to repent and return to HaShem and His Torah. The others, as ever and as today, chose to see the threatening unfolding events as something natural and quite unrelated to Mitzvah observance. On the contrary, the message of the Prophet of HaShem, they said, was just so much defeatist talk — and such people, prophets or not, as would proclaim such bad tidings should be punished for sedition and for demoralising the people.
3. Yirmiyohu proclaimed his message with a heavy heart for it was a message of the destruction and exile to come. Of course, false prophets held forth and assured the people that all was well. There was no need for Teshuvah — things will be good! But Yirmiyohu fearlessly rebuked and warned everybody, from the humble worker to the king himself, that the only way to avert disaster is by returning wholeheartedly to HaShem and His Torah.
4. It is noteworthy that in the description of how Yirmiyohu is appointed as Novvi, the Possuk says that Yirmiyohu was ordained, not as a Novvi to the Jewish People, but as “a prophet to the Nations.” To be sure, Yirmiyohu was to proclaim the message of HaShem to the Jewish People. But HaShem’s message was never intended to be restricted to only the Jewish People. On the contrary, the message is for all Mankind but it is through HaShem’s Chosen People that it is to be proclaimed to all. That message is that Mankind is to live in peace and harmony, in righteousness and justice, under the Sovereignty of HaShem.

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5. The Haftorah ends with one of the most beautiful messages of hope and encouragement. Yirmiyohu is told that bad times are coming, that because of their backsliding, the rod of HaShem's wrath — in the shape of Nevuchadnetzar, King of Babylon — is poised to punish the Jewish People with devastation and exile. And yet, says HaShem to Yirmiyohu, he should tell the Jewish People that with all that, HaShem does indeed love them. HaShem's punishments are never intended to destroy the Jewish People; they are to chastise and correct them. HaShem's punishments are to serve as a warning to others that they shall not follow along the wrong path. And while HaShem is the G-d of all Mankind, despite His anger at them, the Jewish People is and always will be HaShem's Chosen People, His treasure. And why do they deserve such chosenness? HaShem tells Yirmiyohu to go and proclaim the answer in the streets of Yerushalaim; proclaim it loud and clear so that everybody, Jew and non-Jew, shall know it forever: "I remember," says HaShem, "how faithful and trusting you were when you followed Me, like a loving young bride who is willing to follow her husband, even into the unknown wilderness, into desolate territory, a place of no food or water," to receive HaShem's Torah and become the message-bearers of HaShem's Sovereignty to all Mankind. No other nation, no other people, had ever shown such trust and loyalty in HaShem. This trust, this loyalty, is the reason why HaShem has chosen the Jewish People to be His People more than any other.
6. This proclamation remembers the Jewish People as HaShem's bride, so to speak. It recalls the past. As for the future, Yirmiyohu is told to proclaim that the Jewish People will always be not so much קְדוֹשׁ ה', a People whose aim is "to become holy to HaShem," but more קְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל לַה', "a People that is itself the actual Sanctuary of HaShem" — that is the Jewish People! The Jewish People is a dedicated Sanctuary belonging to HaShem! The enemy might well destroy the Mikdash of wood and stone but the real Sanctuary is the Jewish Nation imbued with the Spirit of HaShem and His Torah — and that is indestructible. Sadly, not always will all the individuals of that Nation be able to rise to that great spiritual height. Indeed, whole generations might become estranged from their calling and be lost for a time (Yirmiyohu's own generation was, in its large majority, a sad example of this) but the calling and destiny of the Jewish People remains the same — to be HaShem's People, His representative to the rest of Mankind. The true and everlasting Sanctuary of HaShem is the Jewish Nation functioning as His People through all the storms and struggles of the ages — "the Eternal Jew."
7. This Nation is רֵאשִׁית תְּבוּאָתוֹ, "HaShem's first fruits" (as indeed He told Par'o in Egypt through Mosheh our Teacher in His first ever message to the Nations of the world, "My firstborn son is Yisroel!") But from the fact that Yisroel is "HaShem's first fruits," the Novvi is saying too that all of Mankind is the handiwork of HaShem, all of Mankind is precious in His sight. Everywhere, in the whole of humanity, HaShem has implanted His Spirit, that all of humankind can be elevated to righteousness and good. But leading them in this quest is His People, His firstborn, the ones who first made Him the Father and King of all Mankind.
8. Through the lens of history it is seen how all those who have ever tried to devour HaShem's People or harmed them in any way have been the destroyers of true humanity. They are viewed today as retarded in their spiritual level, as haters of G-dliness, and those that would hurt or denigrate HaShem's People are considered as if they have insulted HaShem Himself. By their malevolence, they would bring a diminishing in Mankind but, like someone trying to smash down a stone wall, ultimately they destroy only themselves.