

Parshat Mattot-Masei
Hashem Wants Our Love
Rabbanit Atara Lindenbaum - Class of 2022

This Shabbat marks the second Shabbat of the three that are designated for national mourning in the period known as “*bein ha-metzarim*,” or “between dire straits.” It is in these three weeks that, as a nation, we mourn the losses of our two temples and the destruction of much of our people. We long for a time when we can feel closer to our God through the ultimate rebuilding of what was lost.

Bringing our hearts and minds to such an endeavor is challenging. It is hard to mourn the loss of a temple that we never knew. It is hard to feel the devastation amidst Jewish thriving. The sages were sensitive to this emotional gap and thus instituted a gradual method of mourning, beginning with the fast of the 17th of Tammuz, intensifying with the month of Av, and culminating with a final day of mourning and fasting on Tisha B’Av.

The *haftarah* that we read this week is from the second chapter of Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah), a chapter in which the prophet speaks in God’s voice. The God who speaks in Yirmiyahu is ruminating over a nation that has gone astray, one that has abandoned the God who chose them, took them out of Egypt, and brought them to the Promised Land. Somehow this nation has forgotten about their God, choosing to worship foreign gods made out of stone instead.

However, God stands in shock in the *haftarah*, beholding the current status of the people. This was not expected. God is surprised that this was the ultimate outcome. God uses the metaphor of a vignerone who planted the best vines, but ended up with sour grapes.

וְאֶנְכִי נִטְעֵתִיךָ שׂוֹרֵק כָּלֵה זָרַע אֲמַת וְאִיךָ נִהְפַּכְתָּ לִּי סוּרֵי הַגָּפֶן נִכְרִיָּה:

I planted you with noble vines,
All with choicest seed;
How did you change
Into a base, an alien vine!
(Jeremiah 2:21)



God expresses both resentment and confusion in this verse, noting that after planting the most expensive choice seeds, the plant changed into some strange vine. The prophet uses the word איך- how? God put in all of this effort, to choose a nation and cultivate them in the most caring fashion. The nation's wayward ways and their dismissal of Hashem comes as a hurtful and disappointing surprise.

Jeremiah's use of shock in the voice of God here humanizes God to a point of empathy. With God's shock comes self doubt; at the beginning of the chapter, God ruminates over His own actions. Perhaps, God wonders, it was God's actions, something that God did, that caused the nation to go astray.

מה-מִצְאוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם בִּי עוֹל כִּי רָחֲקוּ מֵעֲלֵי

What wrong did your ancestors find in Me
That they abandoned Me?
(Jeremiah 2:5)

God feels alone, and wants to know: Did I (God) do something wrong that would have caused this?

The Malbim, a 19th century commentator, elaborates on God's ruminations. People leave their families and religions, says the Malbim, when they feel like they are not genuinely loved. Other times, says the Malbim, people feel like the love they felt was dependent on some condition, and once that condition is fulfilled, their love dissipates. God wonders, according to the Malbim: do *Bnei Yisrael* feel unloved? Did I (God) fail to show them how much they are loved, and how much that love is unchanging no matter what the circumstances?

It is for this reason that Yirmiyahu prefaces this prophecy with the words

זָכַרְתִּי לָךְ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲהַבַת כָּל־יְלֻתֶיךָ לְכַתֵּךְ אַחֲרַי בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה:

I accounted to your favor
The devotion of your youth,
Your love as a bride—
How you followed Me in the wilderness,
In a land not sown.
(Jeremiah 2:2)



God reminds us of the beginning of our relationship together, a time full of unconditional love. Note, though, that the prophet does not mention here God's love for the people, but only the people's love for God. Perhaps God is talking to Godself here, wondering if the people still love Him. They followed Me to the desert like lovers under a wedding canopy, God recalls. How can we get back to that love? As if God is looking through old wedding photos, or photos of a newborn child now grown, unsure of how the relationship got so tattered.

This uncertainty humanizes God in a way that makes way for human empathy. Jeremiah the prophet is helping us open our hearts to a God we cannot see by painting a picture of a lonely God who is longing for our company. "It is God who sues for our devotion, constantly, persistently, who goes out to meet us as soon as we long to know Him," says Abraham Joshua Heschel in *Man is Not Alone*. May this period of *bein ha'mitzarim* bring us to long to know God, to know that we are loved, and to know that we are sorely missed.



Rabbanit Atara Lindenbaum is the Associate Rabbanit at the Hebrew Institute of White Plains. Previously, Rabbanit Atara directed and led Maharat's Emerging Scholars in Israel Program, taught conversion classes through the Israeli Rabbinate and served as the Director of Community Education at the Tel Aviv International Synagogue. She also served as Judaic faculty at schools in Boston, Houston, and New York. Rabbanit Atara completed the Tanakh Educator's Program through Matan and Hebrew University, as well as a Masters in Urban Planning from Hunter University. Rabbanit Atara worked in community planning, focusing on methods of inclusion and equity. Rabbanit Atara works to support and lead communities of spirituality and meaning that are inviting to all who want to join.