

# Haftarat Matot/Masei מטות/מסעי

**Torah: Numbers 30:2–36:13**

**Haftarah: Jeremiah 1:1–2:28; 3:4; 4:1–2**

## The Almond Tree

### General Overview

Parashiyot Matot and Masei are usually coupled together to make a double Torah portion; thus, the haftarah reading for this week will also be a double portion. Herein we are introduced to the ministry and the first messages of the prophet Jeremiah.

After a few introductory words about his call, the Holy One speaks to the prophet three words of rebuke to Israel. The first two are brief word images, those of an almond tree and a boiling pot. The third and last word of this haftarah is a longer sermon consisting primarily of a stern rebuke for Israel's spiritual adultery. The haftarah concludes with portions of other sermons that Jeremiah preached. The one in chapter three is another section of rebuke and in chapter four there is an appeal for Israel to come back to the Lord.

### Connection to the Parasha

It is difficult to determine specifically what was in the minds of the sages when they determined that these haftarot were the ones to accompany the Torah portions of Matot and Masei. Hertz provides a hint for us. It seems that we are not to look so much for a direct connection to the Torah portions. Rather, this haftarah

is the first of the three “Haftarahs of Rebuke” that precede the Ninth of Av, the anniversary of the Destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the choice of these passages for the haftarah is not so much based on their connection to the Torah portions. Instead, they were apparently chosen because their content helps to prepare the people's hearts and minds for the remembrance of the observance on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, commemorating the horrible destruction of both the First and the Second Temples.

### Exposition

Most scholars agree that when the prophets gave their messages they were first spoken messages rather than written ones. In other words, when we read the prophets such as Jeremiah, we are reading their sermons.

In this haftarah, several of Jeremiah's messages are recorded. They can be distinguished from each other by noting the phrase, “Then the Word of the Lord came to me...” or “Then the Lord said to me ....” Thus, it is safe to assume that each time the Lord spoke to Jeremiah, we are presented with a new sermon.

Moreover, these sermons are not necessarily recorded in chronological order. The Jewish sages who compiled the different haftarot also did not pay much attention to the chronological order of the prophet's messages; they were more interested in the spiritual impact the message would have on the readers

or listeners. This spiritual compilation affects our analysis of this particular haftarah. Accordingly, we will examine this passage from Jeremiah by dividing it up according to the different revelations that are recorded in which God spoke to Jeremiah — in at least five different times. Thus, our outline looks like this:

- I. The First Word — A Prophet to the Nations
- II. The Second Word — The Almond Tree
- III. The Third Word — The Boiling Pot
- IV. The Fourth Word — God's Contention
- V. The Fifth Word — The Return

In this excerpt from Haftarat Matot/Masei, we will focus on section II, The Almond Tree.

## **II. The Second Word — The Almond Tree**

We come now to the second word from God recorded in this passage, in Jeremiah 1:11. Again, as we stated earlier, this does not necessarily mean that this was the second prophetic message that God caused Jeremiah to speak. We cannot know upon which occasion the words that begun in 1:11 were spoken. But we can observe that it is the second message that Jeremiah wrote.

In this revelation, the Holy One showed Jeremiah the rod of an almond tree, followed by the explanation of the vision. “And the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘You have seen well, for I am watching over My word to perform it’ (1:12).

Jeremiah surely understood God’s explanation clearly. But we may need some help in understanding it. There are two elements of Hebrew, thought and language, that we need to know in order to unpack this revelation.

First, it is important to see the word play that Jeremiah uses. The Hebrew word translated “almond rod” in 1:11, *shaked* (שקד), is the same root as the word translated “watching over” in verse 12 (*shoked* – שוקד). The first is a noun and has different vowels than the second one, which is a verb.

This leads us to the second piece of intonation. This concerns the function of the almond tree in Israel. The almond tree is the first tree to flower in Israel, heralding the beginning of the spring.

In early spring, a myriad of almond blossoms burst forth over Israel — sometimes even sparkling through a covering of snow. This is a beautiful annual reminder of God’s watchfulness over His Land and People.<sup>2</sup>

The almond tree, therefore, “is a harbinger of spring, as though it watches over the beginning of the season. So the Lord is watching to bring judgment on Israel’s sins.”<sup>3</sup> Just as the almond blossom is a watchful herald of the imminent arrival of springtime in Israel, so God’s words to Jeremiah will find their imminent fulfilment. The Lord will not waste time to bring about what He will tell Jeremiah He will do. Just as the almond blossoms tell us that spring will definitely arrive, so will God’s words definitely be fulfilled.

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<sup>1</sup> J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 710.

<sup>2</sup> Keren Golan, from an unpublished study she did on the trees of Israel. Part of her study, including this quotation can also be found on the “Trees of Israel” calendar for 1997–1998, published by *First Fruits of Zion* and *Love Song to the Messiah*.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Feinberg, “Jeremiah” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (“EBC”), vol. 6, 385.