

Haftarat Mishpatim משפטים

Torah: Exodus 21:1–24:18

Haftarah: Jeremiah 33:25–26, 34:8–22

God is Faithful to His Covenantal Promises

General Overview

One of the most difficult jobs that God can give to someone is to be a prophet. One who was called to be a prophet had at least three tasks. He was first to call the wayward people to repentance, evidenced by faithfulness to the covenant by speaking into the issues of the day and warning them of impending judgment. Second, he was to encourage the faithful remnant by assuring them that God would keep the covenant even when the majority of their fellow countrymen did not. Third, he foretold the coming of the Messiah and the Messianic age in order to warn those unrepentant that Messiah's coming meant judgment for them, and to uplift the faithful by reminding them that someday, all would be well.

If we were able to grade the difficulty of each prophet's ministry, certainly Jeremiah would be close to the top. Like Isaiah, God told him to speak to a people who would not listen. In addition, however, Jeremiah not only had to contend with unreceptive people, he also had to put up with many false prophets who caught the ears of the people more than he.

Why did the people listen to the false prophets rather than to Jeremiah? Most likely it was because people would rather hear messages of good things to come more than promises of judgment and difficulties. The latter is what Jeremiah had to announce. He was called by God to tell the people of Judah that soon the Babylonians would invade Jerusalem, destroy the Temple, and carry off a good portion of the population far away from their homes to Babylon.

The haftarah to which we have now arrived is one of those heavy messages so characteristic of Jeremiah. It is a warning of impending judgment. For what reason was this warning given? Jeremiah specifically mentions the fact that the people of Judah had agreed by covenant to set the slaves free every seventh year, just as the Torah had instructed them. But soon after they set the slaves free, they quickly put them into bondage again, breaking their covenant and ignoring the instructions of Torah concerning the Shabbat year.

Accordingly, this haftarah is a passage where Jeremiah tells the people that because of their actions, they now faced horrible destruction from the torches and swords of the army of the king of Babylon.

Connection to the Parasha

The opening verses of Parashat Mishpatim provide the basis for the connection between this haftarah and the weekly Torah portion. We read in Exodus 21:2, "If you buy a Hebrew slave he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall

go out as a free man without payment.” The verses following that continue to explain the teaching about Hebrew slaves and how to handle them properly. In Jeremiah's day, some 800 years later, the descendants of Israel were abusing this teaching in the Torah and not treating their slaves according to the wishes of their God and according to their covenantal agreement with God. This haftarah in Jeremiah chapter 34 is a record of that situation.

Exposition

This passage is about release. Israel needed to release their servants. They needed to release their land as well so that it could rest for a year. But, because they broke their covenant by refusing to release their servants and land, God promised a release for them — a seventy-year release, in fact — in Babylon!

The sages, however, included an additional passage at the end of this haftarah, taken from the previous chapter, chapter 33. It speaks of assurances from God that even though there would be hardship and distress while they lived outside of the Land, God would, nevertheless, see to it that the people of Israel would never cease from existing.

In light of all of this, here is the outline that should adequately expose the contents and message of this haftarah:

- I. Zedekiah's Covenant
- II. God's Covenant

In this excerpt from Haftarat Mishpatim, we will look at the section on God's Covenant.

God's reaction to this episode in the history of the people of Judah may seem like somewhat of an over reaction. After all, for centuries, both Israel and Judah were committing what many would call greater sins: idolatry, murder, sacrificing children, and injustice, to name a few. If the people of Judah were doing all of those (and they were) for such a long period of time, why did God wait until this one sin was committed before He decreed their demise?

There might be at least two reasons for God's timing. First, God reacted strongly because the sacred covenant was flagrantly violated. Second, God moved because the teaching of slavery was abused. Let us look at each of these separately.

A. Covenant Violation

First, in 34:13, God begins His indictment of Judah by reminding them that He, too, made a covenant with them. The implication is, did *He* break that covenant like they broke the covenant that they just made about the release of the slaves? Of course, the answer is a resounding "No!" That is why God demonstrated such anger when they broke the covenant they enacted.

The whole point is that covenants are covenants. They are sacred agreements. Moreover, they are often ratified by the death of innocent blood, the animal

sacrifice. Hence, God was teaching them that life is sacred and man's words are also sacred, especially man's promises to each other and to God.

In this case, as we have seen, they made their covenant in God's special presence at the Temple. God was, in effect, a witness to their agreement. Such contracts, therefore, are extremely important. Breaking them becomes tantamount to lying to God. If people treat such covenants lightly, they can easily get the impression that God also regards His covenants as unimportant. Since God always relates to His people on the basis of covenant, then, it is crucial that everyone considers His words to be absolutely truthful, reliable, and faithful.

B. Hebrew Slaves Are Special!

The second matter concerns itself with the particular covenant into which the people entered. It has to do with the issue of slavery. In 34:13, God reminded them that shortly after He set them free from slavery in Egypt, He gave them instructions about how to handle their slaves. In fact, interestingly enough, Dr. Nahum Sarna observes that,

The list of *mishpatim* (enactments) begins with ten laws regulating slavery. None of the other law collections from the ancient Near East opens with this topic.¹

He continues to explain the reason for this. Sarna remarks,

The priority given to this subject by the Torah doubtless has a historical explanation: Having recently experienced liberation from bondage, the Israelite is enjoined to be especially sensitive to the condition of the slave.²

What “condition of the slave?” Here is one of the places where the light of the Torah shines its brightest. The Torah says that the slave in the holy community is to be considered, “your brother.” He possesses an inalienable right to rest on the Sabbath day and on festivals. When circumcised, and thus identified with the covenant of God, he participates in the Pesach offering. He is to be “avenged” if he dies from a beating from his master; and the loss of a limb, even a tooth, at the hands of his master automatically gives him his freedom. A fugitive slave may not be extradited and is accorded protection from maltreatment and the right to live wherever he chooses. Finally, a six-year limit is set on his term of service. No wonder, the rabbis observed in Kiddushim 20a that he who buys a Hebrew slave is like one buying himself a master.³

God made sure that those who were unfortunate enough to have to go into bondage (usually because of financial reasons) would never again be treated like Israel was treated when they were slaves in Egypt. God redeemed that nation once and for all from such bondage, never to have them return there again. He,

¹ Nahum N. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 118.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 118–119.

therefore, insures that whoever would be a servant in Israel would be treated with dignity, fairness, and graciousness.

Hence, when the people of Judah broke their covenant that insured that Jewish servants would be treated as the Torah taught, it is no wonder that God responded with such drastic measures. They not only violated a covenant, they also violated one of the most important provisions of God's covenant with their nation. After all, their God was known through their Scriptures as “the Lord God who brought you up from the yoke of slavery.” God is a God who sets people free from slavery by His power and keeps them free by His Word. He expects His people to reflect those characteristics in their lives and to show them to others. The people in Zedekiah's day did not. Therefore, they incurred a very severe discipline from the Holy One.

C. God's Release

The people's version of releasing their bondservants was to go back on their words and force the servants to return to their servitude. At this point, God became rather sarcastic with the people. He said, “You have not obeyed Me in proclaiming release each man to his brother. Behold, I am proclaiming a release to you ... (34:17)!

The language here is full of Torah allusions. First, the text says that they were to release each man “to his brother.” This is the kind of terminology the Torah uses when it is discussing the treatment of slaves among Israelites (Leviticus 25:19–42; Deuteronomy 15:12).

Second, when God says that He is announcing a release for them because they reneged on their release of the servants, he uses the words, *likra dror*, דרור לקרא, which mean, “to proclaim liberty.” This same phrase is used in Leviticus 25:10 where the Torah teaches about the year of the release of slaves. During that year they were to *likra dror*, דרור לקרא, proclaim liberty throughout the land. The very language that Jeremiah used, therefore, purposely reminded the people of the Torah.

One thing we can conclude from this is that whatever God decides to do against the people, He is doing it because, by oath, He is acting out of covenantal obligation. Thus, in biting sarcasm, God says to the people, in effect, “You call this a release? If you want to speak of release, I have a release for you. I am going to release you from living in this land!” Accordingly, God announces in 34:17 that Judah would be released from the land and from His protection so as to fall victim to sword, to pestilence, to famine, and to the shame of the kingdoms of the earth. These consequences are nothing other than what God said they would be in Deuteronomy chapters 27–29. Long before this instance, the Holy One had already stated what would happen to His people if they continuously and flagrantly violated the Torah. Some release!

Finally, God puts the finishing touches on His sarcastic condemnation of their treatment of the slave covenant. In 34:22, He announces the return of the

Babylonians to Jerusalem in order to wreck havoc with the Holy City and its suburbs in Judah.

But notice how this declaration is worded. He uses the same Hebrew word used throughout this passage, a word from the root *shuv* שׁוּב. This root can mean either “repent” or “return,” as it does in this passage. In reality, however, the Lord would have rather had them repent than to return the slaves to slavery. But because they returned the slaves to their tasks, in 34:22 He says He will return the Babylonians to *their* task — that of destroying their city.

In other words, “They have forced the slaves to return to bondage; therefore, the Babylonians shall return and be the instrument of the Divine punishment.”⁴

D. God's Promise to Israel

Just as there was a postscript note about King Zedekiah and the promises God made to him, so also does this haftarah have a postscript note about God's promises to Israel. This is contained in Jeremiah 33:25–26. Although this short section precedes the main body of the haftarah, the sages have decided to put it after chapter 34 when it is read and studied. Why this unusual arrangement?

The answer is no great mystery. God spoke words of stern rebuke in chapter 34. He proclaimed to the people of Judah that they would enter into captivity at the hands of the Babylonians. Rather than concluding the haftarah at such a hopeless place, the rabbis want to remind us of the other promises which God spoke through Jeremiah to the people of Judah. These are the covenantal promises of restoration for Judah, which are contained in 33:25–26.

E. Another Covenant

The subject of Jeremiah chapter 34 has been “covenant.” It was a broken covenant that was the catalyst that brought on the horrible consequences foretold by Jeremiah. It was also by covenant that God sent these troubles upon His people; He was covenantally obligated to do so. He swore by oath in Deuteronomy chapters 27–29 that if Israel was unfaithful to the Covenant of Sinai, that He would bring gradual difficulties and tribulation upon them for the purpose of bringing them back to Himself. If God did not bring on the disciplines He promised, we would have every right to question His veracity.

Now, in 33:25–26, God speaks of yet another covenant. This is a reference to the promises He made concerning the perpetuity of heaven and earth according to His Word in Genesis 8:22.

The laws of heaven and earth are the whole order of nature. The established institution of the order of nature is a work of divine omnipotence.⁵

⁴ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 324.

⁵ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 8, 77.

Just as Divine omnipotence keeps the heavens and the earth functioning for eternity, so also does the same Divine omnipotence keep the people of Israel from perishing forever from the face of the earth. There is even more: This same Divine omnipotence also keeps Israel from being rejected as God's covenanted people.

Despite the troubles they had and the apparent destruction of their nation from the dispersion of Israel to the captivity for Judah, God still says, "I will return their fortunes and will have mercy on them. (33:26)." This also is a covenant, a sacred promise by the Holy One for His wayward children.

F. Our Security

Israel (both Israel and Judah) is a picture of how God relates to all of His people. When we became believers in Yeshua, we also entered a covenant with God. Just like Israel, our relationship with God may be strained and rocky at times because of our flesh. If Israel was to cease to exist as a nation or lose their privilege of being participants in an ongoing covenant(s), then we as believers in Yeshua would have every reason to walk in grave insecurity.

But, thanks be to God, our salvation is built upon better promises than conditional promises. Just like with Israel, God may have to levy discipline, even severe discipline upon us from time to time, yet we will always remain His because He is always faithful to keep His covenants. Even though at times our flesh may even deny knowing Him (as Israel did) yet God's oath to us is secure because Messiah's death atoned for all our sin and made us new creations with God's life flowing through us. Just as Israel owes her very existence as God's covenant nation to God's promises, so do we believers. For Yeshua reminds us in John 10:26–30,

My sheep hear My voice and I know them and they follow Me and I give to them eternal life and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to Me is greater than all and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and the Father are one.

Just as a beleaguered and battered Israel needed to be reminded of God's covenantal promise to them concerning their security with Him, so do all of us who claim to know Messiah Yeshua. We all get discouraged. Sometimes many of us become like wandering sheep, falling victim to the devices of our flesh. But we have a faithful God who seeks to remind us that if we have entered into a covenantal relationship with Him, He will ever and always be faithful to that covenant.