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Today's Torah

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Shabbat Hazon/Shabbat Parashat Devarim
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T'SHA B'AV

The Man of Lonesome Sorrow

Torah Reading: [Deuteronomy 1:1 – 3:22](#)

Haftarah Reading: [Isaiah 1:1 -27](#)

He awoke from the nightmare with a scream, as he did every night for almost forty years. His heart was racing, his body drenched in sweat, the taste of ashes upon his tongue. His mind was reeling with vivid images of fiery destruction. His ears were filled with shrieking and wailing. He saw the streets of Jerusalem running with rivulets of blood, the Holy Temple ground into the earth, the lifeless bodies of the priests scattered about the Temple Mount, their vestments torn and desecrated.

The dreams began after Jeremiah's seventeenth birthday. At first, they were benign, filled with inspiring words:

*Before I created you in the womb, I selected you;
Before you were born, I consecrated you.
I appointed you a prophet over the nations.*

I replied, Ah, Lord God! I don't know how to speak, I am still a boy.

*And the Lord said to me: Do not say, "I am still a boy,"
But go where I send you, and speak whatever I command you.*

*See, I appoint you this day
Over nations and kingdoms:
To uproot and to pull down,
To destroy and to overthrow,
To build and to plant. (Jeremiah 1:5-10)*

But the nightmares arrived soon thereafter. As a child, he had been taught that the land of Israel sensed and responded to the behavior of its inhabitants. "You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I Myself abide, for I the Lord abide among the Israelite people." (Numbers 34:34) Suddenly, he could viscerally feel the land's revulsion of its immoral populace. Their idolatry and moral obliviousness, their indifference to the covenant, but most of all, their arrogant sense of exceptionalism left him nauseous.

*I brought you to this country of fertile land
To enjoy its fruit and its bounty;
But you came and defiled My land,
You made My possession abhorrent. (Jeremiah 2:7)*

When he shared his nightly visions with his family, they laughed at him... "Crazy teenager!" His family were priests. They reveled in Jerusalem's glories, the holy city, God's dwelling on earth!" But he saw what no one else cared to see -- the banal cruelty that festered behind the sanctimonious facade. Every urban society tolerates a certain amount of mundane evil. The homeless, the hungry, the abandoned, the desperate -- they live just behind the shiny, gleaming monuments, just beyond the view of the prosperous and powerful. Most of us learn to treat all this as normal; we look the other way and don't see. But not him. Not the prophet. Prophecy begins in the eyes -- in the compulsion to stare into the harsh reality that polite society would rather ignore. To see the shadow -- all that no one wishes to acknowledge.

Every night, Jeremiah was assaulted by the horrid visions. He felt the pain of every hungry child, the humiliation of every abused woman, the anguish of every neglected soul. The daily diet of deceit, betrayal and corruption overwhelmed him. He knew the reckoning was coming. He perceived the precursors of catastrophe in all the commonplace practices of business, politics, and religion, especially religion. As the nightmares grew acute and with no other outlet, he went to the steps of the Holy Temple to proclaim his warning.

*Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and
swear falsely and sacrifice to Baal and follow other
god who you have not experienced and then come and
stand before Me in this House which bears My name and
say, "We are safe!" Safe to do all these abhorrent things?! (Jeremiah 7:9-12)*

The more bizarre his behavior, the more he became an anathema to his family, community and the state. Shamed and castigated, he was incarcerated, if not as a dangerous criminal, then as a lunatic and a social nuisance. His lonely sadness soon descended into despair.

*Woe is me, my mother, that you ever bore me,
A man of conflict and strife with all the land!
I have not lent, and I have not borrowed;
Yet, everyone curses me! (Jeremiah 15:10)
Why did I ever issue from the womb,
To see misery and woe,
To spend all my days in shame! (Jeremiah 20:18)*

Sitting in the prison, he knew that he had failed. Jerusalem was destined for destruction and nothing could save her.

*The carcasses of this people shall be food for the
birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth, with
none to frighten them off. And I will silence in the
towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem the sound
of joy and gladness, the song of the bridegroom and
the bride. For the whole land shall fall to ruin. (Jeremiah 7:34)*

One night, Jeremiah awoke from the nightmare with a fearsome scream. But he knew that this day's end would be different. The onslaught had begun. The Babylonian armies arrived to destroy the city. As he had seen thousands of times in his dreams, the walls crumbled, the city filled with terrified screams, the Holy Temple burned.

Then, for the first time in forty years, Jeremiah slept soundly. The horrible night visions were gone; replaced by a new vision -- of new beginning, of rebirth, of renewal. Divine love replaced divine revulsion. The prophet of national doom turned into a champion of spiritual resilience. With the same passion and might he had once hurled words of despair he now pleaded with his people to hold fast to hope. Hope became his watchword.

*I will build you firmly again,
Oh maiden Israel!
Again you shall take up your timbrels
And go forth to the rhythm of the dancers.
For the day is coming when the watchmen
Shall proclaim on the heights of Ephraim:
Come, let us go up to Zion,
To the Lord our God!
Thus says the Lord:
Restrain your voice from weeping
Your eyes from shedding tears;
There is hope for your future
-- declares the Lord"
Your children shall return to their country.
(Jeremiah 31:4-6, 16-17)*

The Haftorah this week and next bring us the words of the prophet Jeremiah. T'sha B'Av begins at sundown Saturday night. May Jeremiah's message of hope lift us from sadness to joy.

Rabbi Edward Feinstein, is senior rabbi of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California. He has served on the faculty of the Ziegler Rabbinical School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University since 1990 and is an instructor for the Wexner Heritage Program, lecturing widely across the United States. In 1982, Rabbi Feinstein became the founding director of the Solomon Schechter Academy of Dallas, Texas, building the school's enrollment from 40 to over 500 in eight years, and winning national recognition as a center of educational excellence. In 1990, he assumed the position of executive director of Camp Ramah in California, the largest Jewish camp and conference center in the western United States. He came to Valley Beth Shalom in 1993 at the invitation of the renowned Rabbi Harold Schulweis, whom he succeeded as the congregation's senior rabbi in 2005.



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