

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



Unleashing the Haftarah

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The Latter Prophets, multiple authors, c. 10th–5th centuries BCE

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Tanakh is its self-critical character. Like the narratives of the Torah, the “former” prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) feature only flawed heroes. The “latter” prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the twelve minor prophets) raise the stakes. Soaring and searing, they rail against the injustices and failures of society, holding a mirror to structural inequities that create poverty and oppression. The prophets lay bare the systemic corruptions within even biblically-created institutions—the priesthood, monarchy, and nation—revealing hypocrisies, false pieties, and breaches of the public trust.

The prophets also offer consolation, hope, courage and strength; indeed, underlying their words lies deep sadness and longing, grounded in love of God and humanity. They grieve the tragic distance between what is and what ought to be.

The Torah teaches us that no person is perfect, but neither are we exempt from self-examination and repentance. The prophets teach us that no society or institution continues indefinitely without systemic distortion; but neither are we free from collective self-examination and repentance. They vividly paint the consequences of ignoring societal rot, and implore us to return and restore our foundations.

Today, the prophet’s accusations are too often proven true even as the indictment is being read. The soul-searing, life-shattering experience of the prophetic word has been domesticated and tamed; haftarot are now sweetly chanted, relegated to a corner where their message can be safely ignored, challenging no one and threatening nothing. That’s why we created *The Voice of the Prophet*, a weekly podcast in which the prophetic word of the haftarah is declaimed in English by renowned actor Ronald Guttman, rendered understandable and insistent—even demanding.

I invite you to subscribe and listen. Last week’s episode marked the start of ten special haftarot: three of rebuke, read in the period of collective mourning between the 17th of Tammuz and Tisha Be’av, then seven of comfort for the period of collective reflection, repair, and repentance leading up to Rosh Hashanah. During these weeks—and beyond—listen to the podcast, and read the episode notes for food for thought about what the prophet’s message might mean to us today.

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Mattot-Masei 5778

מטות-מסעי תשע"ח



Always Attaining Spiritual Maturity

Rabbi Joel Alter, Director of Admissions, The Rabbinical School and H. L. Miller Cantorial School, JTS

The US Constitution provides that one must be 35, 30, or 25 years old to be president, senator, or representative, respectively, and the 26th Amendment provides that a US citizen gains the right to vote at 18. In the United States, the right to drink alcohol is established at age 21. One must stay in school and cannot give consent for sexual activity until age 16–18. For a driver’s license, one must generally be 16. So I grimace when we proudly proclaim 12-year-old girls and 13-year-old boys “Jewish adults.” What a simple, juvenile, and forgettable matter this Judaism must be if one attains adulthood in it earlier than one attains any other marker of maturity—besides access to Facebook. What can it mean to be a Jewish adult when one is otherwise manifestly an adolescent, and still looking yearningly ahead at the age of arrival?

Mattot, the first of this week’s portions, provides a springboard from which to explore the issue.

It begins with rules regarding vows, stating that when a man makes an oath he must fulfill it or face legal consequences if he does not (Num. 30:3). The rest of the chapter concerns vows and obligations taken by a woman. To take a vow is effectively to enact legislation on oneself. Given that in the biblical world a woman is nearly always subject to the authority of either her father or her husband, there is a provision for him to cancel her vow if he does not approve of it. There is much to say about the status of women in the biblical world, but that is not my purpose here. Ours is an evolving tradition, thank God.

Rashi explores the Torah’s curious use (in 30:4) of the word *ne’arah*—suggesting youth—to describe the woman taking a vow while still living in her father’s house. Is she a mature woman—in which case she is no longer under her father’s authority, or is she a child—a minor, in which case by definition her vow does not

have legal standing, and would not need to be annulled even if her father disapproved of it?

Mishnah Nidah 5:6 lays out a protocol regarding vows and dedications taken by adolescent boys and girls. Worried about vows that may not be fulfilled, which would devalue vows in society, but also wanting to honor the commitments people make, the Mishnah asks what happens when a girl in her 12th year, or a boy in his 13th, takes a vow.

The Mishnah establishes that, for a girl, from 11 years and one day and throughout the 12th year—that is, until she becomes bat mitzvah—her parents must have an exploratory conversation with her to discern the weight and merit of any vow she’s taken. “Do you really understand before Whom you’ve made this vow?” they are to ask. If it emerges that she understands before Whom she’s made her vow, then her vow stands and she is obligated to fulfill it. But if it emerges that her vow was merely an unserious or fleeting expression of the moment, without a mature appreciation of what it means to stand before God, then her vow has no standing. The protocol is the same for a boy in the year before his bar mitzvah birthday.

The Mishnah further establishes that even if an unusually mature and religiously perceptive child utters a vow *prior* to their bar/bat mitzvah year, that vow cannot have legal standing. Similarly, even if a regrettably immature and religiously indifferent adolescent utters a vow *after* reaching bar/bat mitzvah age, their religious deficiencies do not absolve them of the obligations of their vow. There is something special about that year of ripening into the age of mitzvot, and there is a firmness to the milestone of the bar/bat mitzvah birthday: the age of accountability has arrived.

To return to our verse for a moment, Rashi concludes that the *ne’arah* spoken of in 30:4 is a girl in that transitional year. In the biblical context, then, the vows of a girl who is nearly, but not quite, bat mitzvah are subject to review by her father. Once she is married, her vows are subject to review by her husband. Within the biblical system, this is clear and reasonable enough, though it’s a world apart from our own values and family structures. Before moving on, I want at least to acknowledge that #MeToo’s questions about autonomy and authority stalk our portion’s discussion.

The Mishnah’s protocol of parents exploring their children’s religious intent in the transitional year indicates that religious maturity is something one grows into, and that one’s parents must be engaged in monitoring and cultivating it in their children. Thus far, I have cited only the Mishnah’s concern with an

adolescent’s understanding of religious commitment. This is a cognitive and emotional measure. But the Rabbis also regard puberty as the marker for religious responsibility. Elsewhere, the Gemara offers skill and practical knowledge as the measure for when one commences adult participation in ritual mitzvot (e.g. “A child who knows how to shake the lulav properly is obligated for that mitzvah” [BT Sukkah 42a]). Tradition ultimately drew a line at age 12 and 13 as a matter of public policy, but, in reality, religious “arrival” is not a one-time or clear-cut moment.

So is one a Jewish adult after all at the end of the transitional year, when one becomes bat or bar mitzvah? Not entirely. With bar or bat mitzvah one does become accountable for mitzvot, be they the mitzvot we’ve inherited through tradition or the vows and obligations we impose on ourselves. But Judaism’s familial and communal context means that, ideally, the conversation that parents have with their adolescent children is one that we need to be having with one another, young and old, peer and elder alike, throughout our Jewish lives. An adolescent, whose life is largely contained, can have a certain understanding of what it means to stand before God. But only when community and the life one lives with God intersect as one matures can Jewish commitments take on their full shape, expression, and effect.

Further, whatever our standing as adults with regard to mitzvot, for many of us lived reality is far more fluid. Were the most trusted and loving and insightful people in our lives to ask if we really know why we’re doing what we’re doing as Jews; why we’re making the commitments we are; if we understand before Whom we stand, our answers may be no more sure than those of an adolescent in earliest formation. Or perhaps, like a spiritually attuned and perceptive child, we may enjoy a clarity of religious vision that suffuses our lives with purpose.

Our parashah, and the mishnah that illuminates it, are concerned with the integrity of our Jewish words as demonstrated in our action. This is neither an abstract concern nor a wholly private one. The loving, engaged, and searching relationship between parent and adolescent child outlined in Mishnah Nidah has something to teach us about how a Jewish community takes itself seriously, guards itself from foolishness and folly, and cultivates Jewish lives of meaning and purpose.

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