



PROBING THE PROPHETS

BY RABBI NACHMAN (NEIL) WINKLER
FACULTY, OU ISRAEL CENTER

“The Tragic Seer”

Over the past years and previous articles, I have made the point that Yirmiyahu – whose prophecy is read for our haftarah – is rightly considered as the “The Prophet of Doom”. As one whose messages from G-d that were to be shared with Israel were filled with the most difficult predictions of the fall of Judea – he, understandably, has “earned” that unflattering title. However, I feel that a more fitting appellation, might be “The Tragic Seer”. Rather than focusing on the harsh messages that he was charged to deliver to the sinful nation, we would do well to focus on the agony that filled his years in pursuit of social justice and spiritual redemption for his beloved nation. It is precisely this oft-ignored component of Yirmiyahu’s character that must be understood and appreciated.

This approach rests upon our realization that the condemnations he issued were not given with an anger and bitterness against the people but, rather, as strong messages meant to bring the nation that he deeply loved back to the G-d they had abandoned.

In a most enlightening essay, Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein supports this approach by comparing the prophecies of Yirmiyahu with those of his predecessor, Yishayahu. These two n’vi’im prophesied at different times and to different communities, and, therefore, offer dissimilar visions to their

respective communities. However, Rav Lichtenstein also uncovers a difference in the very tone of their messages of censure to the people – differences that reflect their separate approaches in delivering Hashem’s criticisms to the nation.

And it is through the very tenor of Yirmiyahu’s criticisms that his overwhelming affection for his nation is revealed.

The first prophecy in Sefer Yishayahu – the haftarah that we are to read next week – relates the prophet’s first condemnation of the sinful nation. In it, Yishayahu calls out Israel as being “weighed down by iniquity” (*“keved avone”*), who were “evil offspring” (*zerah m’re’im*) - all because “they had forsaken G-d” (*“azvu et Hashem”*). Clearly, the prophet used these horrific depictions of G-d’s people for having committed the most despicable of iniquities – idolatry. It is no wonder that Chazal allowed these harshest of condemnations to be read only on the Shabbat before Tish’a B’Av.

And yet, 150 years later, when Yirmiyahu had to condemn his generation for the self-same outrage in the opening chapters of his Sefer, he does not describe idolatry as a result of national corruption but, rather, as a tragic mistake committed by a confused and misled people. The language he uses is not one of censure or denunciation but one

of question: "Why?"

Rav Lichtenstein points to the navi's questions asked in our haftarah: "*Ma matz'u avoteichem ahvel?*", "What 'wrong' did your **fathers** find in Me?" asks G-d (and Yirmiyahu); "*Ha'eved Yisra'el?....Madu'a hayah lavaz?*", "Is Israel a slave? Why did he become (the enemy's) prey?" The obvious answers to the questions are, of course, unspoken criticism of Israel but, having been couched in question form, the censure calls for more thought and consideration from the people and not a reaction of anger and denial.

The navi's love for his people is further reflected by the criticism that he directs to the leadership, the religious guides and the false prophets. Just listen to Yirmiyahu crying out Hashem's words (2:8): "The Kohanim did not ask: 'Where is G-d', the teachers of

Torah knew Me not... (and) the false prophets prophesied by the B'aal!" Who, then, is to blame for the iniquities and moral morass, asks the navi. NOT the nation herself, but only those who MISLED the masses!!!

These are the opening words of the reluctant seer, one who could not willingly condemn his beloved people. In these early messages to his generation, Hashem's agent acts much like a teacher who hopes to help and support his charge – not frighten or threaten a confused student.

This is the essence of Yirmiyahu.

And why he truly is, in my estimation, "The Tragic Seer". ■

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