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יְרֵמְיָהוּ
JEREMIAH
THE FATE OF A PROPHET

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Jeremiah's Prophetic Initiation

Jeremiah becomes aware of his prophetic message during the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign, or 626 BCE. Josiah's reformation is already under way, and the king is busy purging Assyrian culture from Israel and Judah. Jeremiah, a young man of about thirteen, is fully aware of the spiritual implications of the events unfolding in the vicinity. News of the demise of the Assyrian king and the rise of the Babylonian kingdom has already reached Anathoth. The balance of power remains unclear, the roles of heroes and villains have not yet been assigned, and the implications of the fall of one empire and the rise of another have yet to be discerned.

Jeremiah, presumably, receives his first prophecy in Anathoth. God tells him: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). The expression "to the nations" does not mean, specifically, non-Israelites, but rather indicates that Jeremiah will be speaking to a much wider target audience. He will not be confined to the role of local prophet, concerning himself solely with the moral edification of his coreligionists. The map of the world will be forever before him, and he will prophesy the acts of God toward the nations.¹

1. For different interpretations of Jeremiah as a prophet of Israel and the nations, see S. Zalevski, "I Appointed You a Prophet Concerning the Nations," in *A Volume in Honor of H.M.I. Gevanyahu* (Jerusalem, 5750), 185–210 [Hebrew].

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Already here, in Jeremiah's prophetic initiation, we see that prophecy has been branded upon his being, irrespective of his free will. In response to his evasion of God's word – "I do not know how to speak, for I am still a boy" (1:6) – God touches his mouth, saying: "Herewith I put My words into your mouth" (1:9). This is the defining moment of Jeremiah's life. The insertion of God's word into Jeremiah's mouth makes prophecy an inextricable part of his being, whether he likes it or not. God then expounds upon Jeremiah's role as "a prophet concerning the nations":

I appoint you this day over nations and kingdoms: to uproot and tear down, to obliterate and destroy, to build and plant. (1:10)

The boy is appointed prophet at a fateful moment, as massive upheavals shake the known world. He does not yet know the names of these empires to be obliterated and built, uprooted and planted. He knows only that his hour has come, and that God controls the playing field.

Jeremiah then receives his first prophetic visions – the rapidly budding almond branch and the thorny tumbleweed² facing down from the north. These two visions render him fully alert, his ears cocked and his eyes straining, every muscle in his body tensed. When asked, "What do you see?" he immediately answers, "An almond branch I see" (1:11). Having just been initiated and given his prophetic mission of heralding the uprooting and rebuilding of nations, Jeremiah is presented with two symbols that, in a chiastic structure, reflect this dichotomy. The blossoming almond branch symbolizes life and renewal. Therefore, when he answers, "An almond branch I see," God responds, "You have seen well" (1:12). These are words of praise not for his sight, but for his interpretation of the vision – you have envisioned the rise of a nation, corresponding to your future role as one who will "build and plant."³

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2. Translator's Note: Though most translations render this vision as a "seething pot" or the like, "thorny tumbleweed" is more consistent with the interpretation that follows.
 3. As suggested by H. Mack, "An Almond Branch I See," *Beit Mikra* 39 (5754): 269–76.

Jeremiah's Prophetic Initiation

The vision of the almond branch is closely followed by the image of the tumbleweed – “wind-blown brushwood I see, facing down from the north” (1:13). Jeremiah sees a pile of thorny burnet shrubs (*Sarcopoterium spinosum*, or *sira kotzanit* in modern Hebrew), a native Mediterranean shrub burned for cooking and heating purposes.⁴ Fierce northern winds threaten to blow the pile of thorns southward. While the almond branch indicates *when* the prophecy will come to fruition (the buds are *about* to burst open), the tumbleweed signifies *where* – “*From the north* will disaster break loose upon all the inhabitants of the land” (1:14). Despite these clues, it remains unclear exactly which northern empire will rise up next.

Jeremiah's prophetic initiation concludes with God's urging him to gird his loins:

Rise and speak to them all that I command you. Do not cower before them, or I shall make you cower before them. Today I have rendered you a fortified city, a pillar of steel, and bronze walls against all the land – Judah's kings, officers, priests, and aristocrats. They will fight against you, but they will not overcome you, for I am with you – says the Lord – to save you. (1:17–19)

4. See Y. Felix's explanation, “Parables of Nature and Agriculture in the Book of Jeremiah,” in Luria, *Studies in Jeremiah I*, 119 [Hebrew]. Felix debates whether Jeremiah's vision, a *sir nafuah*, is indeed a nature image or the more common explanation, “a seething.” For a summary of possible explanations, see Y. Hoffman, ed., *Jeremiah (World of the Bible)* (Tel Aviv, 1999), 25–26 [Hebrew].

627–622 BCE

Prophecy of Reunification

The prophecy of Jeremiah emerges during Josiah's reformation. Jeremiah's early prophecy envisions the reunification of Israel and Judah, which suits the spirit of Josiah. As a young boy from a family of priests in Anathoth, Jeremiah is not truly part of either kingdom. Anathoth is a priestly city within the lands of the tribe of Benjamin, on the border between Judah and Israel. It pledges allegiance to neither kingdom.¹ As noted, the priests of Anathoth are not active in the Jerusalem Temple; rather, they live quiet lives, tilling their fields.

CHAPTER 3: "MARKETING" THE VISION OF REDEMPTION TO THE EPHRAIMITES

Jeremiah's first prophecy leads him straight to the territories of the former northern kingdom, Samaria and the Galilee:

Go out, proclaim these words toward the north, and say: Return, O unruly Israel – says the Lord; I will frown upon you no longer, for I am kind – says the Lord – I will not be angry forever. (3:12)

1. See Y. Bin-Nun, "Territory of Benjamin, Territory of the *Shekhina*," <http://www.ybn.co.il/mamrim/m47.htm> [Hebrew], and a partial English synopsis, <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/yeru/18yeru.htm>.

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Those who have remained in the land after the exile of the ten tribes do not see moving to Judah as an option, nor do they have neighborly relations with it. They live a relatively autonomous life under Assyrian rule. Jeremiah voices a new promise to the Israelites of Samaria. Whereas Isaiah prophesied, during the final war between Judah and Israel, that “within sixty-five years, Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people” (Is. 7:8), there now arises a fresh young prophet, calling, “Return, O unruly Israel.” Israel’s sins are but the unruly rebellions of youth. Considering Isaiah’s harsh prophecies and Hosea’s comparison of Israel to a prostitute constantly betraying her husband (Hos. 2), we can understand how differently the soft words of a young prophet from Benjamin ring in the ears of Ephraim:

Return, O mischievous children – says the Lord – for I am your caretaker, and I will take you, one per city, two per family, and I will bring you to Zion. (Jer. 3:14)

In these lines, Jeremiah offers insight into the process of return that he set out to spearhead together with King Josiah.² First, Jeremiah announces in God’s name that “I will not be angry forever.” God bears no grudge against His wayward children; repentance and atonement are possible in His world. Though Samaria has been inundated with idolatry for centuries, and even Judah has been worshipping idols for three generations since Hezekiah’s death, their fate has not been sealed for destruction.

Second, Jeremiah wishes to outline the process of return to Jerusalem for the remnants of the Israelite kingdom. The inhabitants of Jerusalem must merely purge their hearts of idolatry, whereas the northerners must resolve to return to this city, which they have forsaken since the days of Jeroboam I. The profound, centuries-old gap between the kingdoms can be bridged only by an intense process of repentance and return. What can make the people of Ephraim accept the tidings that they are to come back to Jerusalem, having mocked Hezekiah’s invitation eighty years before?

2. Y. Ben Shem, “The Prophet Jeremiah and the Exiled of the Ten Tribes,” *Beit Mikra* 18 (5733): 221–26 [Hebrew].

Prophesying Reunification

Young, inexperienced Jeremiah must repackage and market an old, unwanted product. He expects the Ephraimites to reject his invitation for three reasons: As descendants of Rachel, who believe that Joseph was Jacob's chosen son, they are unwilling to embrace the Davidic dynasty; they do not view Jerusalem as the ultimate capital – Mount Ephraim, and within it, Bethel, is nearer and dearer to them; and the Temple is no holier to them than the places of worship that have served their ancestors for over three hundred years. Jeremiah must overcome these prejudices, so he emphasizes new "selling points."

Jeremiah announces to the children of Ephraim that the Jerusalem to which they will return is not the same one abandoned by Jeroboam centuries before. Jeremiah is careful to strike the House of David from his vocabulary, for the Ephraimites are obviously uninterested in that product. He promises that their return to Zion will be guided by faithful shepherds who will lead the people wisely: "I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who shall feed you with knowledge and understanding" (3:15). In his heart, Jeremiah certainly means Josiah, whom he considers the perfect leader to ingather the exiles of Israel. But to his audience, he remains deliberately vague.

Yet this careful diplomacy is just the first step. He saves the real surprise for last:

And when you multiply and bear fruit in the land in the days to come – says the Lord – people will no longer mention the Ark of the Lord's covenant or yearn for it; it will be neither remembered nor recalled, and another shall not be made. In those days, Jerusalem will be called "Throne of the Lord," and all the nations will be gathered to her, in the Lord's name, to Jerusalem. They will no longer follow the impulses of their evil hearts. In those days, the House of Judah will go to the House of Israel, and they will come together from the north to the land that I allotted to your fathers. (3:16–18)

Jeremiah tells the people remaining in the north that when they return to Zion, to a reunited Kingdom of Israel, the Ark of the Covenant will no longer be so important. It is worth recalling that the Ark was the

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centerpiece of the Temple. The Kingdom of Judah had reveled in its glorious position as keeper of the Ark since David's time. Ever since Solomon had built the Temple, the Ark had resided in the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the Temple.

The people of Samaria know this well. They have not forgotten one of the formative stories of their kingdom, which took place before David came to rule in Jerusalem, when the Ark of the Covenant was in Shiloh. In that distant past, the Philistines captured the Ark during a war in which two sons of High Priest Eli were killed. The Ark never returned to the territory of the northern tribes (see 1 Sam. 5–6). It became a symbol of the power and glory of the House of David – and of the weakness and inadequacy of the early Israelite kingdom. Jeremiah, himself a descendant of Eli, acts on his awareness of the Israelites' sensitivity about the Ark, freeing it of its symbolic role.

The northerners are loath to trust a Judean prophet promising that the Ark of the Covenant will no longer dominate their worship, so Jeremiah makes considerable efforts to convince his audience. To reinforce his message, he uses five different phrases negating the centrality of the Ark: “people will *no longer* mention the Ark of the Lord's covenant or yearn for it; it will be *neither* remembered *nor* recalled, and another *shall not* be made.”

In truth, the Ark of the Covenant was already being concealed during the reign of Manasseh, as recorded in Chronicles' description of Josiah's celebration of Passover:

And [Josiah] said to the Levites, who instructed all Israel, who were holy to the Lord, “Put the Holy Ark in the Temple that Solomon son of David, King of Israel, built – do not carry it on your shoulders; now serve the Lord, your God, and His people, Israel.” (11 Chr. 35:3)

Obviously, if Josiah demanded that the Ark be returned to the Temple, it was not there to begin with. Yehuda Elitzur offered an interesting theory regarding the Ark's removal from its proper place: Manasseh, who commissioned secret and labyrinthine royal catacombs, had reinterred

those buried in the older royal burial grounds in the new catacombs at the garden of Uzzah:

Manasseh certainly remembered the events that had occurred in his father Hezekiah's time, when Jerusalem had been about to fall into Assyrian hands and was miraculously saved from destruction at the last minute. Manasseh understood that miracles of this nature do not happen every day, and that Jerusalem was no longer invincible. He therefore transferred the treasures of his forefathers and concealed them deep beneath Jerusalem's rocky terrain. It is almost certain that within those same labyrinthine catacombs, he commissioned a special section for particularly important artifacts, the most important of which was the Ark. He did not do so out of awe of its holiness; rather, the pragmatic leader deemed it vital to hide this most valued and glorious piece, which held such an honored place in the Israelite consciousness.³

It emerges that at the beginning of Josiah's reform, the Ark was removed from its hiding place, but Josiah commanded the Levites to conceal it again: "do not carry it on your shoulders." They would no longer have to carry it about, for it was to be concealed permanently. This is also the meaning of the rabbinic tradition: "Who concealed the Ark? Josiah concealed it" (Yoma 52b).

Jeremiah, enticing the northerners back to Jerusalem, "liberates" them from any Temple-object fetishism and inspires them to rise from idolatry to the worship of God. Jerusalem, in his vision, becomes God's throne. Josiah, in his eyes the greatest of kings, will lead Israel to the Kingdom of Heaven, which will reinforce the earthly kingdom of David.

3. Y. Elitzur, "The Controversy Surrounding the Ark of the Covenant in the Days of Josiah," in Elitzur, *Israel and Scripture*, 230–34 [Hebrew].

**CHAPTER 31: CHILDREN SHALL
RETURN TO THEIR BORDERS**

For Jeremiah, voicing a prophecy of the return of the northern tribes is a simple matter. His task is to sell the idea that the time has come for the children of Rachel and Leah to reunite. Ephraim's infrastructure is in shambles, desperately in need of adoption by a more stable government. Since its destruction at the hands of Assyria, Samaria has become an Assyrian backwater. Until this point, native and immigrant Samaritans have lived together while enjoying the patronage of the occupying empire. Now, with war ravaging Assyria, their future is less secure.

Josiah's invitation to Samaria to return to Judah, reinforced by Jeremiah's prophecy, strikes a chord. The third chapter of Jeremiah is directed entirely to Samaria, as is chapter 31, in which the prophet gently entices Ephraim as a loved one who has grown distant and needs to be appeased and cajoled into coming home again:

Thus says the Lord: The people who have survived the sword have found favor in the wilderness, for I will give rest to Israel. From afar, the Lord appeared to me, saying: And with a great love I have loved you, so I have drawn you close to Me tenderly. I will rebuild you, My maiden Israel, and you will be built; you will again play your tambourine and go out and dance with joy. You will again plant your vineyards on the Samarian hills; the planters will plant and enjoy the fruit. For the day will come when watchmen will shout from the hills of Ephraim, "Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord, our God!" (31:1-5)

The chapter opens with the promise that the hills of Samaria will once again be cultivated and their fruits enjoyed.⁴ But it goes on to describe that the vineyard watchmen will call out from the Ephraimite hills to arise and go up to Zion. This festive announcement symbolizes the

4. The prophet uses the word *hillelu* (lit., "be redeemed"), referring to the Jewish law of *neta revai*, by which fruits may not be enjoyed until the fourth year after planting. The implication is that the people will remain on their own soil long enough to eventually enjoy the fruit of their labor.

renewed fraternal love between Judah and Samaria, as well as the latter's recognition of Jerusalem as the locus of God's presence.

Though the chapter is devoted to the people of Samaria, it seems that this last verse addresses the people of Jerusalem. Like a professional mediator conducting political negotiations, flitting back and forth between the parties, Jeremiah tries to present each one with what it wants to hear, what it stands to gain. He promises a stable economy and security to the people of Samaria ("you will again plant vineyards") while offering geopolitical superiority to the people of Jerusalem ("Come, let us go up to Zion").

Jeremiah must also consider that it is more difficult to convince the Judeans of the revolutionary idea of ending the conflict between the two states, which means forgetting past injuries and forging a shared identity that will bind them under one kingdom. Having nodded in Judah's direction, Jeremiah quickly returns to the vision of a new Samaria: "For thus says the Lord: Sing with joy for Jacob; shout out on the hill-tops of the nations; make your praises heard, and say, 'Lord, save Your people, the remnant of Israel'" (31:6).

In chapters 3 and 31, Jeremiah makes frequent use of the name "Jacob." The name resonates with the Samaritans, recalling their forefather Jacob and the city of Bethel, where he encountered God, as well as stressing the origins they share with the people of Judah (who identify with David and his city, Jerusalem). Jeremiah prophesies optimistically, already hearing the sound of the salvation of the remnant of Israel:

I will bring them from the north country and gather them from the ends of the earth, and with them the blind, the lame, the expectant mother together with those in childbirth: a great throng will return here. They will come in weeping, and I will lead them as they pray; I will guide them to running water along a straight path, on which they will not stumble; for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn. (31:7–8)

"Ephraim is My firstborn" – such an expression could never escape Jeremiah's lips in the Judean hills or the courtyards of Jerusalem. This prophecy

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declares that in the struggle for succession between Judah and Joseph and their descendants, Ephraim, of Joseph's line, is the rightful firstborn.⁵

The rest of the prophecy is directed to the entire world, so all should know what is to come:

Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and proclaim it on distant islands, and say: "He who scattered Israel will gather it and guard it as a shepherd over his flock." For the Lord will deliver Jacob and redeem him from the hand of one stronger than he. They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will stream to the Lord's bounty, for grain, for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flocks and herds; their soul will be like a well-watered garden, and they will languish in sorrow no more. (31:9–11)

To conclude this prophecy of comfort and redemption, Jeremiah invokes the memory of Rachel, mother of the tribes of Joseph and the Kingdom of Ephraim:

Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, of mourning and great weeping – Rachel weeping for her children; she has refused to be comforted for her children, for they are no more. Thus says the Lord: Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded – declares the Lord; they will return from the enemy's land. And there is hope for your descendants – declares the Lord; [your] children will return to their border. (31:14–16)

5. This passage is a reaction to the interpretation of Rabbi David Kimḥi (Radak) regarding the words "Go out, proclaim these words toward the north" (Jer. 3:12):

[God] does not tell the prophet to go north to the place where the ten tribes were exiled. Rather, "go out" signifies haste. "Proclaim" means that he should proclaim these words in Jerusalem, before the elders of Judah.

Radak explains thus because he understands the order to refer to the distant north. However, I submit that Jeremiah went on a diplomatic mission to Samaria, within walking distance of his home in Anathoth.

Jeremiah, serving at this early stage as a tailwind for the vision of national healing, sounds like a prophet deeply rooted in Samaria. His prophecy tells of the children of Rachel, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, who were exiled from their lands by Assyria. He has already promised her children that they will again plant vineyards on the Samarian hills, for that is their home, and none will remove them from it again. Now he illuminates his words with a precious, evocative light: Those who passed by Ramah (the village of a-Ram, adjacent to Ramallah) as they were exiled to the northern Assyrian territories will return. The procession of exiles passed Rachel's Tomb on the "road to Ephrath." There is much disagreement about the location of this tomb. However, in the context of this chapter, the opinion of Noga Hareuveni seems most plausible. He identifies Ephrat with Naḥal Perat (Wadi Qelt) and its spring, known as Ein Perat.⁶

Rachel, weeping for her children, is called upon to hold back her tears, for her children will return from hostile lands to their own borders – to Samaria. By turning directly to the tribes of Israel and mentioning Rachel, the mother of Joseph, the beloved wife of Jacob who watches over her children, Jeremiah reaches the climax of his prophecies of consolation. The conflict between Rachel and Leah, between Joseph and Judah, between the House of David and the House of Saul, is about to end. Ephraim is the firstborn, and Rachel is the true mother.

Jeremiah does not stop at his mention of Rachel weeping for her children. He recasts his gaze upon the children of Ephraim themselves:

I have heard Ephraim bemoaning himself: "Chastise me, and I will be chastised, like an untrained calf; turn me back, and I will return, for You, Lord, are my God. For after I had turned away, I regretted it, and after I was made aware, I struck my thigh; I was ashamed and humiliated, because I bore the disgrace of my youth." Ephraim is My dear son, My playful child; for whenever I speak

6. N. Hareuveni, "Rachel's Tomb," in Hareuveni, *New Light*, 143–51. For a range of opinions regarding the tomb's location (between Benjamin and Judah), see Y. Elitzur, "A Voice is Heard in Ramah' and the Location of Rachel's Tomb," *Shmaatin* 59 (5740): 16–22 [Hebrew].

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of him, I miss him even more; therefore My innards ache for him; I will surely show him love – declares the Lord. (31:17–19)

“Ephraim bemoans ... like an untrained calf” – this is one of the greatest defenses of Israel ever proclaimed by a prophet. Look at Ephraim, urges Jeremiah; he is like a newborn calf, whose legs tremble unsteadily. Israel, the inhabitants of Samaria, heard the opposite prophecy from Hosea: “Ephraim is a well-trained calf that loves to thresh” (Hos. 10:11) – a calf habituated in sin. Now Jeremiah compares them to a baby calf that cannot even stand yet. This calf requests of its mother, “Chastise me, and I will be chastised” – I can be trained, if you will only guide me. Jeremiah then concludes, “Turn me back, and I will return, for You, Lord, are my God.” His innovation here lies in envisioning Ephraim’s asking God to take the first step: “Turn me back.”

In Jeremiah’s prophecy, Ephraim confesses his sins: “I bore the disgrace of my youth.” Faced with the pathetic lowing of his unruly offspring, the loving parent, without a trace of anger or bad memories, responds: “Ephraim is my dear son,” even if he is occasionally mischievous and “playful.” “Whenever I speak of him, I miss him even more.” Just as a parent’s heart fills with love the more he thinks of his child, so too, God pines for the son who stormed out in his youthful passion. The parent concludes with an oath: “I will surely show him love.” Thus, Jeremiah completes his promise to the tribe of Ephraim. He arrives at a climax of love and promises that the days of estrangement and alienation have ended at the dawn of a new age.

Jeremiah then says, perhaps to himself, perhaps to us,

With that, I awoke and saw how sweet my sleep had been. For days are coming – declares the Lord – when I will plant the House of Israel and the House of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. And just as I watched over (*shakadeti*) them to uproot and tear down, to obliterate, destroy, and afflict, so I will watch over (*eshkod*) them to build and plant – declares the Lord. (31:25–27)

Upon awakening from his vision, Jeremiah sees all that he has seen in his prophecy. In his prophetic initiation, he beheld an almond branch

(*shakeid*) accompanying the echo of God's voice, promising that He would uproot and tear down, obliterate and destroy, and eventually build and plant. And indeed God quickly draws His children close, ready to build and plant. The comfort comes swiftly, and the days of dreading the evil from the north are over.

**A NOTE ON CHAPTER 31: "A VOICE IS HEARD IN RAMAH"
IN THE POST-BIBLICAL COLLECTIVE JEWISH MEMORY**

Our interpretation of Jeremiah's famous words "A voice is heard in Ramah... Rachel weeping for her children" undermines two basic, highly charged premises within Jewish tradition. First, tradition places Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem in Judah, at a site that has been sanctified by thousands of years of Jewish tears. Second, Rachel is one of the most beloved figures in all of Jewish tradition: in Midrash, liturgy, poetry, literature, and art. Her children's great love for her stems from the midrashic image of her weeping figure, watching over the procession of exiles making its way to Babylon. The explanation offered here – that Rachel is buried in the portion of Benjamin and weeps only over her direct descendants, Ephraim and Manasseh – detracts from the raw emotion and power of these midrashim.

When discussing these famous lines, it is impossible not to mention the midrashic tradition – and all subsequent Jewish traditions – of Rachel comforting Leah's descendants as they go into exile, forty years after Jeremiah spoke these words. Rashi cites this midrash in his commentary on the verse in which Jacob explains Rachel's death and burial to Joseph:

When I was coming from Padan, Rachel died in the land of Canaan, on the road, with a way to go before Ephrath; and I buried her there, on the road to Ephrath, that is, Bethlehem. [Gen. 48:7]

"I buried her there" – Know that I buried her there at God's command, so that she would aid her children. When Nebuzaradan exiled them, they passed by there, and Rachel left her grave and wept and begged for mercy on their behalf, as it says: "A voice is heard in Ramah, of mourning and great weeping – Rachel

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weeping for her children” [Jer. 31:14]. And God responds: “your work will be rewarded – declares the Lord...your children will return to their borders” [31:15]. (Rashi, ad loc.)

This midrash, and Rashi in its wake, has an awesome power. It has elicited Jewish tears throughout the generations, irrevocably sanctifying the site. And Rachel has become the mother of all Jews, including those descended from her sister, Leah.⁷

CHAPTER 23, VERSES 1–8: REBUKE OF THE LEADERSHIP AND FAITH IN JOSIAH

As the months pass, Jeremiah begins to sense the profound failure of his people’s return. Josiah means well and has great aspirations, but does not realize that his campaign to return to God is not penetrating the people’s hearts. Defective local leadership has caused the people of Judah to remain unaware that this period of imperial downfall and radical reform carries great potential for the redemption of Judah and Israel. These regional rulers are the shepherds Jeremiah condemns in his prophecy:

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture – declares the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord, God of Israel, to the shepherds who tend My people: You have scattered My flock and driven them away and have not taken care of them; I will punish you for the evil you have done – declares the Lord. I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back

7. In marking the joint anniversary of Rachel’s death and Yitzchak Rabin’s murder, Hanan Porat, a former Knesset Member, stated:

The agreement with Arafat had already been initialed, stating that Rachel’s Tomb would be designated as Palestinian territory, as part of Bethlehem, when suddenly Menahem Porush [an Ultra-Orthodox Israeli MK] grabbed Rabin and shook him, shouting, “Reb Yitzhak, we’re talking about Mama Rochel!” Tears streamed down his face and drenched Rabin’s suit. I saw Rabin flush, then pale. He didn’t know what to do with himself. He said, “Give me a moment to consider.” Then, right in front of us, he called Shimon Peres – then foreign minister – and said to him, “Regarding Rachel’s Tomb, I wish to reconsider.”

to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing – declares the Lord. (23:1–4)

Jeremiah could have expressed such sentiments only early in his career, when he was still optimistic about the redemption and reunification of Judah and Israel, when he could still draw from the vision of the blossoming almond branch, and when he still had high hopes for the scion of the House of David. The problem he addresses here is local: The shepherds are unfit and must be replaced.

Jeremiah views this discrepancy between the king and the local leadership as a generation gap. Whereas Josiah is young and revolutionary, the local leaders continue to represent the sinful generation of Manasseh. Therefore, God will rid the kingdom of these shepherds, gather the scattered flock from Samaria, and establish a new, worthy leadership. Despite Jeremiah's withering criticism of the old guard, this chapter remains full of hope and joy regarding the impending fulfillment of Josiah's messianic vision. Just as Isaiah prophesied hopefully about Hezekiah and the flourishing (*tzemah*) of the Davidic dynasty (Is. 4:2), Jeremiah says of Josiah:

Days are coming – declares the Lord – when I will raise up a righteous branch (*tzemah*) of David's line: He shall reign as king and prosper, and do what is just and right in the land. In his days, Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety; and this is the name by which he will be called: The Lord is our righteous Savior. (Jer. 23:5–6)

Here, a messianic vision bursts forth from Jeremiah.⁸ He beholds Josiah, selects him as the one in whose days “Judah will be saved, and Israel will

8. Throughout the books of the prophets, from Isaiah through Zechariah, the term *tzemah* – branch, sprout, growth, flourishing – is associated with the house of David. See B. Oppenheimer, “The Historical Testimony of the Books of Haggai and Zechariah,” in Oppenheimer, *The Visions of Zechariah: From Prophecy to Apocalypse* (Jerusalem, 5721), 5–7 [Hebrew].

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live in safety,” and assigns him the epithet: “The Lord is our righteous Savior.”⁹ Jeremiah does not shrink from his tidings at this stage, for Josiah is restoring Israel’s fallen glory. He declares that the period of disgrace that began with Assyria exiling the ten tribes, and extended through Manasseh’s defilement of Judah, has come to an end:

For days are coming – declares the Lord – when they will no longer say, “By the Lord who brought up the Israelites from Egypt,” but “By the Lord who brought up the seed of Israel from the northern land and from all the countries where He had banished them.” Then they will live in their own land. (23:7–8)

Israel’s recent enslavement to Assyria and the return of those lost in its empire will eclipse the Israelites’ enslavement in Egypt and their entrance into their land, led by Moses. Whoever witnesses this miracle will no longer refer to the Exodus from Egypt as the definitive example of God’s glory. The return of the lost tribes from the north will surpass all the miracles Israel has ever known.

Jeremiah is convinced that God’s promise to rebuild after the destruction will soon be realized. He feels that the people have already experienced destruction with the exile to Assyria. Now, with the ascent of a Davidic king, the days of resettling and replanting are imminent.

CHAPTER 30: MOCKING THOSE WITH LITTLE FAITH IN REDEMPTION

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying: Thus said the Lord, God of Israel: Write all the words I have spoken to you in a book. For days are coming – declares the Lord – when I will bring back the captivity of My people, Israel and Judah – says the

9. It has been claimed that Jeremiah is referring to Zedekiah, whose name may be interpreted as “the Lord is our righteous Savior (*tzidkenu*).” See J. Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel* (Jerusalem, 1926), 64–66 [Hebrew]. But at this stage it seems that Jeremiah still believed in Josiah as a hope for the renewal of the Davidic reign; we may thus assume that the king is alluded to in the phrase “in his days he will save (*beyamav tivasha*),” thereby referring to both Judah and Israel.

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Lord – and I will return them to the land I gave their ancestors,
and they will inherit it. (30:1–3)

God's order to inscribe all of Jeremiah's prophecies in a scroll is no doubt intended "to preserve them for a long time" (32:14), and ultimately to demonstrate their authenticity to the faithless of a later era. This may have been the first of the scrolls that Jeremiah inscribed, and its main message is one of great consolation. In the days of Jehoiakim (ch. 36), Jeremiah will write a second scroll, filled with lamentations. But for now, he wishes to inform Israel and Judah of God's promise:

And these are the words that the Lord spoke to Israel and Judah:
For thus says the Lord: We have heard a voice of trembling, of
fear and no peace. Ask now, and see: Does a male bear children?
Then why do I see every man with his hands on his loins like a
woman in labor, every face turned pale? O how great that day will
be, like no other; and it will be a time of strife for Jacob, but he
will be saved from it. On that day – declares the Lord of Hosts –
I will break his yoke off your neck and rip off your bonds; no
more will strangers enslave him. Instead, they will serve the Lord,
their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.
So fear not, My servant Jacob – declares the Lord – and do not
be dismayed, O Israel, for I will rescue you from afar and your
descendants from the land of their captivity, and Jacob will again
have peace and tranquility, with none to strike fear in him. For
I am with you – declares the Lord – to rescue you; for I will put
an end to all the nations among which I have scattered you, but
I will not put an end to you; I will chastise you in due measure;
I will not let you go entirely unpunished. (30:4–11)

Jeremiah is describing society in Judah and Israel at a time of great unrest in the northern empires. For him, a young prophet in Anathoth, the impending tremors that will announce the collapse of Assyria signify the "day of the Lord." He playfully mocks the men cowering in the face of world events, their faces pale. The image of a man grabbing his loins like a woman in labor is borrowed from Isaiah, who compares the

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future redemption to birth pangs: “Like a pregnant woman nearing delivery, trembling and screaming in her pangs, so are we before You, O Lord” (Is. 26:17).¹⁰

Jeremiah is bursting with joy and yearning when he declares: “O how great that day will be, like no other!” His predecessors also fore-saw the turbulence that would precede redemption: Amos (ch. 5) and Isaiah (ch. 2) described the “day of the Lord,” as did others.¹¹ “It will be a time of strife for Jacob, but he will be saved from it,” has become the motto of the Jews during times of national crisis, as it promises that redemption will follow the bleak periods. Jeremiah continues to soothe the people’s defeated spirits, promising that the heavy yoke imposed by oppressive nations will soon be broken. In his mind’s eye, he again sees the House of David rising up:

Instead, they will serve the Lord, their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up for them. So fear not, My servant Jacob – declares the Lord – and do not be dismayed, O Israel, for I will rescue you from afar and your descendants from the land of their captivity, and Jacob will again have peace and tranquility, with none to strike fear in him. (Jer. 30:9–10)

Once again, Jeremiah addresses not Judah, but the united “sons of Jacob,” the unified Kingdom of Ephraim and Judah. He promises the destruction of Assyria – “I will put an end to all the nations among which I have scattered you” – but foretells that Israel will endure forever. The prophet continues to meditate on this vision of redemption, culminating with a coda that relates to the end of days:

At that time – declares the Lord – I will be a God for all the families of Israel, and they will be My people. (30:25)

10. This verse is the source of the literary tradition of the “birth pangs of the Messiah,” referring to the calamities preceding the redemption. See Sanhedrin 98b.

11. See Hoffman, *Jeremiah*, 147–48.