

Sermon for Parshat Pinchas
July 30, 2016; Congregation Sinai, San Jose, CA
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I see the branch of an almond tree.

What do you think that means? Yes, yes, you think it means I'm nuts. Besides that. Does it mean the back door of the sanctuary is open and there's a new tree out there in the courtyard?

If it's symbolic, if it's a metaphor, what does it mean? What's the metaphor for?

I see a bubbling pot, whose foam is pointed to the north.

What do you think that could mean? Does it mean we're having soup at Kiddush? Or that you need to report to the CDC that I'm cooking again? Besides that.

Is it nothing more than an indication of which way the wind is blowing? Perhaps. But literally, or metaphorically?

An almond branch. Boiling foam pointed north. How do you think the two are connected? What if I came to a board meeting, or got on the news, and said I see those things. What would you think? How about when I tell you they're both visions that I had? Ah, now you know you can lock me away.

Two thousand years ago, why would the reaction have been any different than yours? Forget the fleeting Sunday School image we have of guys in beards and sandals, with lots of sheep and no wi-fi. They put their clothes on arm at a time just like you. Just like you, they ate, drank, breathed, laughed, cried, worked for a living, misbehaved, bemoaned about the next generation, had vehement political opinions, and never saw the Cubs win a World Series.

The prophet Jeremiah had those two visions I related. And he shared them.

For context, Jeremiah was around starting in about 626 BCE. He had a prophetic career, mostly expressing what was taken as gloom and doom, through the reigns of five kings of Judah – the southern kingdom – all the way through the destruction of the First Temple, Solomon's Temple, in 587 BCE. From the start, he prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem, which didn't exactly make him popular. It was going to happen because of how far the Israelites had strayed from the laws, and how much forsaking they'd done for their own sakes.

Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet. Some even conspired to kill him. When he complained about it to the Big G, he was told he ain't seen nothin' yet. Jeremiah is often compared to Moses. Both were reluctant, did their thing for forty years. Both rebuked the Israelites. Both faced internal revolts. The difference is that Moses' time ultimately concluded with

the Israelites entering the Promised Land. Jeremiah's concluded with the destruction of the First Temple. Or is that such a difference?

In Moses' time, the Israelites squabbled, complained, strayed, and wandered sometimes aimlessly. It was like all these people you see wandering mindlessly with Pokemon. Which of course was first done by the Israelites. When asked why they hang out in the desert, wandering around for so long, they'd say "because there's manna here" – po ki man.

In Jeremiah's time, the Israelites squabbled, complained, strayed... This time they were doing it *in* the Promised Land. So the First Temple was destroyed. Was it punishment? That the Big G allowed it to be destroyed? The Big G didn't prevent it. Sent Jeremiah to warn about it for forty years. And then, the Babylonian Exile. This time, it was not until forty-eight years later, 538 BCE, that the Israelites were allowed to return.

Now, imagine someone today talking about visions of almond branches and boiling pots with their steam pointing toward the north, symbolically meaning we're about to be destroyed by Canada. Imagine someone doing that for forty years – which in the internet age is about eighteen months. Yelling about all the things the people are doing that are wrong, saying that we face imminent doom. Sounds like a presidential campaign, doesn't it.

As Aaron Sorkin wrote in "The American President," "He is interested in two things, and two things only -- making you afraid of it, and telling you who's to blame for it. That, ladies and gentlemen, is how you win elections. You gather a group of middle age, middle class, middle income voters who remember with longing an easier time, and you talk to them about family, and American values and character."

So who says this stuff doesn't have relevance today? I'm not here to say whether this means one candidate is right in taking this same approach, or that another is right because they're not. That's for you to decide by November 8th. I'm just here to point out the tie-in, with some comic relief.

The Jewish people are the people of "never again." Right? Here we are now, in the years where the last Holocaust survivors are leaving us, and some people – perhaps not enough – wonder how, or if, we'll continue to remember in the same way. Will it gradually become, to more and more people, a story rather than a reality? But this isn't about the Holocaust, it's about learning from history in general. It needs to be about more than not letting a guy with a half-stache rise to power and wipe us out in the land of good beer. It's about knowing history, understanding cause and effect, and learning from it so that *nothing* bad is repeated which could be avoided.

Even Battlestar Galactica took a more cynical view in the last ten years, making the major theme of its writings not "never again" but "what's happened before will happen again." Do we want to settle for that? It didn't work out too well for them.

You might say “well, that’s just a TV show.” But in this age of screens and decreasing social interaction, how much do the masses really tell the difference anymore?

Is there a lesson from Jeremiah, as I just related him, that impacts the presidential campaign? Are we not surrounded by lessons from the past?

“But history’s boring, man... It’s so ten minutes ago...”

That takes me to another example, which will sound like product placement but isn’t intended to be.

Last night, the Shakespeare company opened Julius Caesar. We know of him, of course, not only for his salad – hold the anchovies, of course – but for “et tu, Brute,” “the Ides of March,” and perhaps some of you know his other greatest hits like “cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war,” or “I am as constant as the Northern Star,” or other lines that Shakespeare stole from Star Trek VI.

What does that matter? Well, the good thing Shakespeare is doing here – if you will, the Bard Mitzvah – is that he’s showing us a story, based on actual historical events, that show just how far someone will go to lead a nation. Cassius conspires to get Brutus to conspire to take out Caesar so that Brutus can rule instead. This might sound more arcane and primitive than a presidential campaign today, but at least when they stabbed people in the back, they actually stabbed people in the back. We’re doing the play in a modern setting, with people looking like politicians, everyday white-collar and blue-collar workers, and military personnel, to help emphasize the modern relevance of the tale.

By the way, to reinforce that not all is gloom and doom, we’re also doing The Three Musketeers – to show the kind of heroes we wish were around today to save us from all that other stuff.

And, only because several of you will ask later, they run in Sanborn Park down in the Saratoga Hills, in repertory, alternating shows on Thursday through Sunday evenings, through Labor Day.

Still feel that internal degree of separation, from this stuff really feeling like it’s a part of today? “Oh, but that’s Sunday School stuff and history class stuff. Boring...”

Think about the story of the man in a flood. Guy lives in an area that’s flooded. He’s on his roof. A guy paddles by in a small boat, says to jump aboard. The man says no, god will rescue me. A helicopter comes by, lowers a rope ladder, says to climb up. The man says no, god will rescue me. The man drowns. In heaven, he asks god why he didn’t rescue him. Big G says “I sent you a boat and a helicopter, what else did you need?”

Miracles don’t have to be Red Seas parting or walls surrounding cities crumbling from a shofar blast. Miracles come from the people and things around us. And it can be ordinary

people, not just the 1969 Mets. And where did the people around us all come from in the first place?

We all see things based on what we know and feel. Where do we get what we know and feel from? It's a part of all we've met, all we've encountered. If you know more of the Torah, of the Tanach, it's more a part of what you know. And feel. As NBC says, "The more you know..."

Today's haftarah was the first of three haftarot of affliction. Fortunately, you are afflicted with hearing me talk only about the first one. But stay tuned, much like how we're doing The Three Musketeers to give more hope to balance out the a-little-too-real Julius Caesar, you'll soon get seven haftarot of consolation leading up to the High Holy Days. But if you want those haftarot to give even more meaningful consolation, immerse first into the affliction. In theatre, we raise the stakes higher so the payoff feels bigger. The more difficult the hardship, the bigger the feeling that a reward will be. Ask any Cubs fan.

(My past sermons are available at <http://brookwrite.com/sermon/>. You might also like my monthly Jewish humor column, Rear Pew Mirror, available at <http://brookwrite.com>, and on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/rearpewmirror>.)