

Together Yet Apart

Thoughts on Jeremiah 44

Rabbi Meir Azari

This article was originally published on the [929 website](#) - an online Israeli initiative offering daily study around the 929 chapters of the bible. This ambitious project aspire to become an equivalent of the Daf Yomi (worldwide cycle of Talmud study). The writers of 929 are thinkers from a very wide range of Jewish streams and organizations, including artists, publicists, politicians, educators and rabbis – among them six Reform Rabbis.

Life in the Diaspora is already a familiar option for Jews living in the Land of Israel when Jeremiah desperately cries out against the incompetent leadership, sinners, and predators who are bringing disaster on the kingdom, which he fears is about to disappear. Exile has been ingrained in the Jewish soul since the time of Abraham, Joseph, and Jacob's other sons who settled in Egypt. Like Joseph, many Jews throughout history have felt at home across the globe, creating a tremendous legacy of spiritual and cultural creativity among the nations of the world.

As I read Jeremiah's words, I fleetingly wonder whether the prophet even sees exile as a force that can strengthen a people that has become negligent in performing its mission, and as a means of purifying a people that has failed to establish a regime rooted in social justice, a fair society, and enlightened leadership in its own land. Is the prophet seeing in his vision the sages of Sura and Pumbedita, Maimonides and the Vilna Gaon, Moses Isserles and the Ba'al Shem Tov, Freud and Einstein, and countless others as reforming and balancing forces for the weak and errant society in the Land of Israel?

Yet as he mourns social disintegration in the Land, the prophet is also well aware of the disadvantages of life in exile. He envisions massive war and devastation that will cost the exiles dearly. Perhaps in his mind's eye he was thinking not only



of the fall of Egypt, but also of the Crusades, the Expulsion from Spain, the Holocaust, and many other disasters of exile?

Life in exile means that the status and the very existence of the Jews are dependent, in part, on the actions and failings of others. Like any other society, both the Land of Israel and the exile are subject to the spirits of the times and to transient and volatile reality. Jeremiah weaves a thread that modern-day establishment rabbis and their representatives fail to understand, namely the unbreakable bond that connects those who live in the Land and those who live in the Diaspora by choice. Jeremiah sees a challenging Jewish cycle of renaissance and exile that is beyond the understanding of those who are presently drunk with power.

The prophet concludes that settling the Land or living in exile are not diametrically opposed alternatives, but two forms of Jewish existence – in his time, and very probably in our own. Historical memory teaches us simultaneously about the existence of exile and the dream of settling the Land. We should recognize the importance of the multiple centers of the Jewish world and to welcome with love their distinct characters.

Though today you sit comfortably in your homeland or by the fleshpot of exile, the land under your feet could shake at any time. If that happens, you will need your fellows across the ocean, and you would do well to make sure that you have a brother or sister there who feels affinity and love for you and those like you.

Rabbi Meir Azari is head of the Beit Daniel Center for Progressive Judaism in Tel Aviv

