

SEFER DANIEL
By Rav Yaakov Medan

Introduction

The following lectures represent the essence of a series of classes on *Sefer Daniel* that I gave in Alon Shevut. These social encounters were an opportunity to commemorate, through Torah study and shared faith, the memory of a young man from our community – Daniel Mandel, son of Cheryl and David – who fell in battle against terrorists in Shekhem, as the commander of a Nachal elite team, on the 13th of Nissan, 5763.

We loved Daniel and we loved his family. We loved Daniel for his perpetual smile, for his sense of humor and his inner joy, which illuminated everything and everyone around him. We loved Daniel for his prayers in the synagogue, which always seemed so genuine, so honest, so innocent. We loved him for channeling all his energy and his mischievous youthful nature into the difficult and dangerous elite military unit in which he chose to serve. We loved him for investing quality years in intensive study of Torah and faith at the pre-military religious academy in Atzmona, where his mature personality was consolidated, and for organizing his friends into joint Torah-study sessions when he spent a brief Shabbat at home on furlough. We loved Daniel, who dreamed, together with his friends, of establishing a new settlement on this good land where our forefathers pitched their tents and where their faith in God and in their path of righteousness and justice shone forth for all generations. We loved Daniel, who was viewed by his soldiers and young charges as a father-figure and educator in all things good. We wished to make a tribute to him in thanks for leaving us such beautiful memories of the beautiful song of his life, of his playing almost every sort of instrument, and of the beauty that he saw in life itself.

To perpetuate his memory, we chose to study *Sefer Daniel*. We chose the Book because of its name. We also chose it because of the prayer of Daniel, the "*ish chamudot*" (greatly beloved man) who is the hero of the book, which recalled for us something of the wholehearted prayer of Daniel, our own "greatly beloved young man." We also chose it because of what seems to us to be the main subject of the book: the matter of *ofkiddush ha-Shem* – that of Daniel in the lions' den, that of his three companions, Chanania, Mishael and Azaria, in the fiery furnace, and that of the "*maskilim*" and the keepers of the covenant, whose lives Daniel foretells in his final vision.

Our Daniel, too, sanctified God's Name. He sanctified His Name in his death, giving his life in Israel's battle against its terrorist enemies. He also sanctified God's Name in his life, in every place where he radiated powerful faith and love of Torah along with a path of uprightness and sincerity, love of justice, and love of man.

This series about Daniel and his book were written at a difficult time (5766) – a time of *chillul ha-Shem* the likes of which I have not experienced in my lifetime. As clouds of dust rise over the destruction of the homes of the courageous and dedicated inhabitants of Gush Katif and the northern Shomron, we will focus on *kiddush ha-Shem*. "*Gadol kiddush ha-Shem mi-chillul ha-Shem*" – "Greater is the sanctification of God's Name than the desecration of His Name" (*Yerushalmi Kiddushin* 4:1, *Sanhedrin* 6:7), and ultimately, *kiddush ha-Shem* will prevail – the *kiddush ha-Shem* of Daniel, the "greatly beloved man," and also the *kiddush ha-Shem* of Daniel, the greatly beloved youth.

"Earth – do not cover his blood, and let there be no resting place for his cry."

Yaakov Medan

Chapter 1: Period and Background

In the third year of the reign of Yehoyakim, king of Yehuda, Nevukhadnetzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And God delivered Yehoyakim, king of Yehuda, into his hand, with some of the vessels of the House of God, and he brought them to the land of Shin'ar, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels to the treasure-house of his god. (*Daniel* 1:1-2)

The opening verses of the *sefer* provide historical background to the story that follows. The prophet Yirmiyahu speaks of the same period:

The word which came to Yirmiyahu concerning the entire people of Yehuda in the fourth year of Yehoyahim son of Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda – which was the first year of [the reign of] Nevukhadretzar, king of Babylon. (*Yirmiyahu* 25:1)

Comparison of these accounts raises an obvious question: If Nevukhadnetzar rose to power in the fourth year of the reign of Yehoyakim, how could he have laid siege to Jerusalem in the *third* year of Yehoyakim's reign? Ibn Ezra explains at length that the siege did, in fact, take place in the fourth (or third) year of Yehoyakim's reign, as stated at the beginning of *Sefer Daniel*. To resolve the discrepancy between the two accounts, he explains that the two sources use two different dating systems, each with its own start of the year. Abravanel^[1] and Malbim adopt the same explanation.

I shall follow Rashi's approach, however, which is based on a *beraita* in *Seder Olam*. According to this explanation, the "third year" referred to in *Sefer Daniel* was actually the third year of Yehoyakim's rebellion against Nevukhadnetzar, in the eleventh and final year of Yehoyakim's reign. We read in *Seder Olam*:

"In the third year of the reign of Yehoyakim, king of Yehuda, Nevukhadnetzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it" – how can this be? Do we

not already know that he [Nevukhadnetzar] began his reign only in the fourth year of Yehoyakim? What this means to teach us is "in the third year – of his rebellion." (*Seder Olam*, chapter 25)

A brief review of the final chapters of *Melakhim* II (chapters 22 onwards) will offer a better understanding of this approach to the chronology of the period.

Independence and Loss of Independence

Yoshiyahu, the father of Yehoyakim, was the last independent king of Yehuda. During Yoshiyahu's reign, the northern kingdom of Yisrael was already no longer in existence; the Ten Tribes had been exiled three generations earlier, in the days of Chizkiyahu. He reigned during the decline and collapse of the great Assyrian empire, which had long dominated the region, and he exploited this situation to expand the borders of the kingdom of Yehuda. Yoshiyahu conquered extensive territory around Yehuda,^[2] aspiring to restore the original borders of the kingdom between the River of Egypt and the Euphrates. His goal was to restore the situation that had existed in the period of David and Shlomo. While falling short of achieving this goal in its entirety, he did manage to consolidate a large and prestigious kingdom. He also attained much in the spiritual realm; he purified the Temple and the whole country of idolatry, and held a Pesach ceremony in Jerusalem. According to *Chazal*, Yoshiyahu even brought back a considerable number of Israelites who had been forced to leave the land with the exile of the Ten Tribes.^[3]

Yoshiyahu's enterprise collapsed with his death in a seemingly insignificant battle against the king of Egypt at Megiddo. His demise prompted a power struggle between his two sons, Yehoachaz and Yehoyakim, who had two different mothers. This sort of family conflict is familiar to us from the stories of Yosef and his brothers in *Sefer Bereishit*, and indeed, the events in this context resemble quite closely the sale of Yosef. After Yoshiyahu died, Yehoachaz, the younger son, ascended the throne, as he was more popular among the people, just as Yosef, Yaakov's younger son, was especially beloved by his father. However, Yehoyakim, the elder son, joined forces with Pharaoh Nekho, king of Egypt, and delivered the kingdom of Yehuda into his hands, as a protectorate, in return for his own coronation in Jerusalem in Yehoachaz's stead.

Like Yosef, Yehoachaz was brought to Egypt and imprisoned. However, Pharaoh Nekho had no dreams, and Yehoachaz was not called upon to offer interpretations. Yehoachaz was not promoted to vizier, and he eventually died in the Egyptian prison. Thus, the kingdom of Yehuda lost its political independence; Yehoyakim and his successors were dependent on and subservient to the reigning powers (Egypt and Babylon).^[4]

The text provides the following description of the coronation of Yehoyakim:

Pharaoh Nekho made Eliakim, son of Yoshiyahu, king instead of Yoshiyahu his father, and changed his name to Yehoyakim, and he took Yehoachaz away, and he came to Egypt, and died there. And Yehoyakim gave the silver and the gold to Pharaoh; but he taxed the land to give the money according to Pharaoh's

command; he exacted the silver and the gold of the people of the land, of each person according to his taxation, to give it to Pharaoh Nekho. (*Melakhim* II 23:34-35)

Yehoyakim was an evil king. He placed Yehuda under the yoke of the king of Egypt and restored the altars for human sacrifice, which his father had destroyed, in the valley of Ben-Hinnom. His reign was full of blood, violence, and corruption. The text goes so far as to compare Yehoyakim to Menasheh. Apparently, this is meant to tell us that the destruction would come because of him; there would be no more opportunities for change.

Yehoyakim was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem... And he did that which was evil in the sight of God, according to all that his fathers had done. In his days Nevuchadnetzar, king of Babylon, came up, and Yehoyakim became his servant for three years; then he turned and rebelled against him. And God sent bands of Chaldeans against him, and bands of Arameans, and bands of Moabites, and bands of the children of Ammon, and He sent them against Yehuda, to destroy it, according to the word of God which He spoke by the hand of His servants, the prophets. It was surely at God's command that this happened to Yehuda, to remove them from before Him, for the sins of Menasheh, according to all that he had done. And also for the innocent blood which he shed, for he had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and God would not forgive this. (*Ibid.* 23:36 – 24:4)

Egypt and Babylonia

In the opening verse of Yirmiyahu's prophecy, cited above, the prophet records that Nevukhadnetzar began to rule over Yehuda in the fourth year of Yehoyakim's reign. The prophet goes on to foretell the fall of all the nations of the region – the Kingdom of Yehuda and the nations surrounding it – at the hands of Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, for seventy years, as well as the punishment which God is destined to bring upon Babylon. In the same prophecy, Yirmiyahu mentions his book of prophecies "about all the nations:"

And I shall bring about upon this land all My words which I spoke about them, all that is written in this book, which Yirmiyahu prophesized concerning all the nations. (*Yirmiyahu* 25:13)

The collection of Yirmiyahu's prophecies concerning the nations begins in chapter 46, where we read:

In which God's word came to Yirmiyahu the prophet, concerning the nations: Concerning Egypt, concerning the army of Pharaoh Nekho, king of Egypt, which was by the Euphrates River, in Karkemish, [and] which was defeated by Nevukhadretzar, king of Babylon, in the **fourth** year of Yehoyakim, son of Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda. (*Yirmiyahu* 46:1-2)

Once again, Yirmiyahu speaks of the fourth year of Yehoyakim. It was in this year that Nevukhatnetzar overpowered Egypt and began to rule over *Eretz Yisrael*.

Yoshiyahu was killed in the battle against Pharaoh Nekho as the latter was making his way to assist the Assyrians and thereby assert his candidacy to inherit the disintegrating Assyrian empire.^[5] In the battle that took place that same year in the city of Charan, near the Euphrates, there was an encounter between the two kings who each sought to reign over Assyria: Nevopolassar, king of Babylon (father of Nevukhadnetzar), and Pharaoh Nekho, king of Egypt. Babylon was a strong kingdom, but was still far from the power that it was to become under Nevukhadnetzar. Egypt appeared to stand a better chance. Yoshiyahu understood the significance of Egypt's expected victory – the extension of Egyptian patronage over Charan, which was on the other side of the Euphrates, would mean that it would rule over the entire area between the Nile and the Euphrates, including *Eretz Yisrael*.

The *gemara* (*Ta'anit* 22b) teaches that Yoshiyahu interpreted the verse from the blessing, "no sword shall pass through your land" (*Vayikra* 26:6) to mean "even a sword of peace" – that is, even the swords of other nations waging war against one another. The ramifications of warring neighbors on opposite sides of Israel would be that the victor would annex *Eretz Yisrael*. Therefore, Yoshiyahu set out to block Pharaoh Nekho at the vital crossing of Megiddo, at the north-eastern entryway represented by Nachal I'ron. Had he succeeded, and had the king of Egypt been forced to turn back, Yoshiyahu could have extended his rule over a considerable portion of the contested region. He could have restored the Kingdom of Israel to its borders at the pinnacle of its glory – from the Nile to the Euphrates.

Yoshiyahu could have succeeded in this mission. He had a strong army, and he had accumulated victories against the neighboring nations. However, his sins rendered him unworthy; he was killed at Megiddo, and it was Pharaoh Nekho who became the ruler of the entire region. It is possible that the battle against Yehuda, after the death of Yoshiyahu, is also related to the war of independence mentioned above. Yehoyakim rose to power with the aid of Pharaoh and subjugated his kingdom to Egypt.

Already in the days of Yoshiyahu, Yirmiyahu had spoken out in his prophecies against reliance on Egypt, which goes against reliance on God. And indeed, in the fourth year of Yehoyakim, Nevukhadnetzar – having succeeded his father, Nevopolassar – defeated Pharaoh Nekho at Karkemish, on the Euphrates. The king of Egypt withdrew, with heavy losses – the usual fate of an army defeated far from its own country^[6] – and Nevukhadnetzar now assumed control over the entire area up until the Nile:

And the king of Egypt did not emerge any more from his land, for the king of Babylon had taken – from the Wadi of Egypt up to the Euphrates River – all that had belonged to the king of Egypt. (*Melakhim* II 24:7)

According to these sources, this battle took place in the fourth year of Yehoyakim's reign. In *Yirmiyahu* 36, we find a hint that *Eretz Yisrael* was actually

conquered only in the fifth year of Yehoyakim's rule, and the same findings arise from Babylonian documents. The text in *Melakhim*, cited above, tells us that Yehoyakim surrendered to the king of Babylon, but he rebelled against him three years later. If the conquest began in the fifth year, Yehoyakim's attempt to establish an independent kingdom took place in the eighth year of his reign.

Yehoyakim held his own for some time, but this was a difficult period. The text records that "God sent bands of Chaldeans against him, and bands of Arameans, and bands of Moabites, and bands of the children of Ammon, and He sent them against Yehuda, to destroy it" (*Melakhim* II 24:2). Nevukhadnetzar himself was busy waging war in the north and was not available to deal with the kingdom of Yehuda.

Three Years of Independence

Let us now return to the interpretation of the *Seder Olam* concerning our verse about the third year of Yehoyakim's reign. This was not the third year since his rise to non-independent power, under the patronage of Pharaoh and then under the patronage of Nevukhadnetzar. Rather, it was the third year of his independent reign, since his rebellion against Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, in his eighth year. The third year, at which time Nevukhadnetzar reappeared in Yehuda, was Yehoyakim's 11th year. At that point, Yehoyakim's reign came to an end and he died (see *Melakhim* II 23:36).

How did Yehoyakim die? He rose to power at the age of 25 and died in the 11th year of his reign – that is, at the age of 35, a young man. This calls to mind Yirmiyahu's prophecy about him:

Like the partridge that broods over young un-hatched, so is he who attains riches but not justly. In the middle of his days he shall leave them, and in the end he will be a fool. (*Yirmiyahu* 17:11)

Although we are told that "Yehoyakim was buried with his fathers" (*Melakhim* II 24:6), his early death suggests that he did not die peacefully of old age, and this is confirmed by the parallel narrative in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*:

Yehoyakim was twenty-five when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem, and he did evil in the eyes of the Lord his God. Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, came up against him **and bound him in chains to lead him to Babylon**. And Nevukhadnetzar brought some of the vessels of God's House to Babylon, and he placed them in his temple in Babylon. And the rest of the deeds of Yehoyakim and the abominations which he committed, and that which was found in him – they are written in the Book of the Kings of Yisrael and Yehuda. And Yehoyakhin, his son, reigned in his stead. (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* II 36:5-8)

This description also sits well with the verses at the beginning of *Sefer Daniel*, which speak of Yehoyakim being led to Babylon along with the vessels from God's House.

In order to reconcile the description in *Divrei ha-Yamim* with the assertion in *Sefer Melakhim* that Yehoyakim was buried with his fathers, we must assume that Yehoyakim died close to the gates of Jerusalem – perhaps in a fall from the chariot to which he was tied, as a prisoner, being taken to Babylon. He fell to the ground and was pounded by the chariot or the animal upon which he had been placed, and his body was thereby mutilated and dismembered, and then partly buried in Jerusalem. This is suggested by the text in Yirmiyahu:

Therefore so says God to Yehoyakim, son of Yoshiyahu king of Yehuda: They shall not eulogize him – “O, my brother” or “O, my sister;” they shall not eulogize him – “O, master!” or “O, his honor!” He shall be buried as a donkey is buried, dragged and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem. (*Yirmiyahu* 22:18-19)^[7]

Thus, Yehoyakim was not incarcerated in Babylon, to the dismay of Nevukhadnetzar, who had wanted to hold the king of Yehuda in prison. Three months later, Nevukhadnetzar went up to Jerusalem and took Yehoyakhin as a prisoner in his stead, as he wanted a live king of Yehuda visibly in his hands. Yehoyakhin remained in prison for 37 years.

Along with Yehoyakim, some of the Temple vessels were taken to Babylon. The verses at the beginning of *Sefer Daniel* add that children of royal descent were also taken captive. In the exile of Yehoyakhin, which took place three months later, the king, the craftsmen, the smiths, and all the notables of Jerusalem were exiled, along with the major vessels of the Temple. The story of *Daniel* refers to the first exile – the exile of Yehoyakim.

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[1] In his work "*Ma'ayanei ha-Yeshu'a*," *Ma'ayan* 5:1. This book is Avravanel's commentary on *Sefer Daniel*, and future quotes from or references to Avravanel will be from this work.

[2] See *Tzefania* 2.

[3] See *Arakhin* 32-33. *Chazal's* teaching about Yirmiyahu's return of the Ten Tribes in the days of Yoshiyahu appears to be based on *Yirmiyahu* 2:6–4:2 and 4:31.

[4] The fall of the kingdom of Yehuda following the death of Yoshiyahu also recalls the events of the Second Temple period under the reign of Shlomo. Her two sons, Yochanan Hyrcanus and Yehuda Aristobulus, fought over the succession; each collaborated with foreign powers in order to assure his advantage over his brother. Hyrcanus, the elder son, collaborated commander Pompey to overthrow Aristobulus, who had snatched the throne in Jerusalem, and this brought about the extension of Roman patronage over *Eretz Yisrael*.

[5] See *Melakhim* II 23:29-30 and *Divrei Ha-Yamim* II 35:20-24.

[6] As borne out by several examples in history, from Hannibal's withdrawal from Rome to the withdrawals by Napoleon, and later the Germans, from Russia.

[7] See also *Sanhedrin* 82a and 104a concerning his skull, which was found much later on.

