

**SEFER DANIEL**  
**By Rav Yaakov Medan**

**Shiur #13: Chapter 7b:**  
**Nevukhadnetzar's Second Dream (continued)**

## **2. The punishment**

Before discussing Nevukhadnetzar's punishment, let us first return to his dream, in which he is compared to a great tree:

"I saw, and behold a tree in the midst of the earth, of great height. The tree grew, and was strong, and its height reached heaven, and it could be seen to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit plentiful; in it was food for all. The beasts of the field sat in its shade, and the birds of the heaven rested in its branches..." (4:7-11)

The image of the tree as a symbol for a king, with his subjects sheltering under it, recalls the parable of the trees recounted by Yotam in *Sefer Shoftim*, and specifically the appeal to the bramble: "Then the bramble said to the trees: If you are truly anointing me as king over you, come and take refuge in my shade" (*Shofetim* 9:15). From the preceding words, attributed to the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine, we conclude that kingship is also symbolized by the fruit of the tree, and the king's subjects are depicted as being nourished by it. Similarly, in Nevukhadnetzar's dream, the tree whose shade provides shelter for all and whose fruit nourishes all is the king, Nevukhadnetzar himself, who rules over all men.<sup>[1]</sup>

Let us compare this dream to Yechezkel's prophecy concerning the king of Egypt:

And it came to pass in the eleventh year, in the third month, in the first day of the month that the word of the Lord came to me, saying: Son of man, say to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and to his multitude: Who is like you in your greatness? Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches and a shady cover, and of great height; and its top was among the thick boughs... Therefore, it stood higher than all the trees of the field, and its boughs were multiplied, and its branches grew long when it extended them, because of the multitude of water. All the birds of the heaven made their nests in its boughs, and all the beasts of the field brought forth their young under its branches, and under its shadow dwelt all great nations... Therefore, says the Lord God: Since you are tall in stature and he has set his top among the thick boughs, and his heart has grown haughty with his height, I shall deliver him into the hand of the mighty one of the nations; he will surely deal with him; I shall drive him out in accordance

with his wickedness. And strangers, the most terrible of the nations, will cut him off, and cast him down; his branches will be strewn upon the mountains and in all the valleys, and his boughs will lie broken in all the channels of the land; and all the peoples of the earth will leave his shade and will abandon him. All the birds of the heaven will dwell upon his carcass, and all the beasts of the field will be upon his branches. So none of all the trees by the waters will exalt themselves in their stature, nor set their top among the thick boughs, nor will their mighty ones stand up in their height, even all that drink water; for they are all given over to death, to the nether region of the earth, amongst the children of men, with those who go down to the pit... I cause the nations to shake at the sound of his fall, when I cast him down to Sheol with those that descend into the pit; and all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, are comforted in the nether region of the earth. They also went down to Sheol with him, to those slain by the sword; those that were in his arm, that dwelt under his shade in the midst of the nations. To whom may you be compared in glory and in greatness among the trees of Eden? But you will be brought down with the trees of Eden to the nether region of the earth; you will lie among the uncircumcised, with those slain by the sword. This is Pharaoh and all his multitude, says the Lord God. (*Yechezkel* 31:1-17)

This prophecy speaks directly to the king of Egypt, but it is also addressed indirectly to the kingdom of Assyria – which, at the time of this prophecy, was already in ruins. The prophecy was uttered about a month before the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem, and about two months before the Temple was burned. The king of Egypt's role in the destruction was the betrayal of his ally, Tzidkiyahu, at the critical moment.

For the purposes of our discussion, both Assyria and Egypt were glorious kingdoms which reigned over many nations. Both appeared like the tall, imposing tree which Nevukhadnetzar saw in his dream; both were cut down and fell to the ground, like the tree in the dream. The message to Nevukhadnetzar here was therefore that his fate would be no better than that of these predecessors. Nevukhadnetzar's advantage over them is that he is called "God's servant," as we have discussed in the previous chapters; it may be for this reason that the "stump of his roots" is left in the ground and he is destined to return to his throne after he is forced to repair his sin and recognize the sovereignty of his own Creator, the Creator of the world.

Let us look at what happens to Nevukhadnetzar when his punishment is imposed on him:

At that very hour, this befell Nevukhadnetzar, and he was driven from men, and ate grass like the oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until his hair grew like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws. (4:30)

Following the punishment, there is repair:

"And at the end of the days I, Nevuchadnetzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and I praised and honoured Him Who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are considered as nothing, and He acts according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can counter His hand, or say to Him: What are You doing? At that same time my understanding returned to me; and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and my splendour returned to me; and my ministers and my lords sought me; and I was established over my kingdom, and further greatness was added to me. Now I, Nevuchadnetzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven; for all His works are truth, and His ways are justice; and He can bring down those that walk with pride." (4:31-34)

What actually happened to Nevukhadnetzar? Ibn Ezra offers the following explanation:

Do not imagine that Nevukhadnetzar became a beast,<sup>[2]</sup> either male or female, for the text says only that he dwelled with the beasts and ate grass like them. What the text means in stating [that his heart would be replaced by] "the heart of a beast" is that his knowledge would be lost; this is the knowledge of the soul. So when the knowledge of the soul was lost, his heart was left like the heart of a beast. The proof of all this is that he says that in the end, "I... lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me."

I have seen one of our reliable companions who told me that he was once upon the island of Sardinia, where a certain man left and fled his family, for he had lost his mind and gone mad. And he lived among the deer for many years, and walked on all fours like them. Now, the king of the island went to hunt for food, and he took many deer, and this madman who thought he was a deer was taken along with them. And his family came and recognized him, and they spoke to him but he did not answer. They put bread before him to eat, and wine to drink, but he did not acquiesce. So they gave him grasses, as they did for the deer, and he ate. And in the middle of the night he ran away, to the wild deer. (Ibn Ezra on 4:28)<sup>[3]</sup>

It may be that Nevukhadnetzar sank into a deep depression or psychosis, chose of his own will to leave human company, and ceased to act like a normal person.

Or perhaps a storm wind, like the one that swept Eliyahu to the heavens, carried Nevukhadnetzar from the roof of his palace to a place where animals lived. There, he was cut off from human society and began to live like the wild animals; with the passage of time, he may even have forgotten language. But his body did not turn into the body of an animal.<sup>[4]</sup>

We might explain the situation in a slightly different way. Perhaps Nevukhadnetzar lost his mind, started to act like an animal within his palace, and was cast out to a place where animals live. It seems that *Chazal* provide a basis for this understanding:

Tzidkiyahu went up to offer gifts. Nevukhadnetzar said, "Dine with me in the afternoon" – and made a banquet... When Nevukhadnetzar saw the food, he began to drool saliva onto his beard. Tzidkiyahu saw this and was astonished: "The world is subservient to such a man?..." (*Tanchuma* [Buber], *Va'era* 18)

A different *midrash* teaches:

Tzidkiyahu found Nevukhadnetzar eating a live rabbit. Nevukhadnetzar said to Tzidkiyahu, "Swear to me that you will not reveal this." He swore to him. (ibid. *Va'etchanan* 1)

The *midrashim* attribute many abominable acts to Nevukhadnetzar which apparently even in those times were considered reprehensible. Thus, for example, the *midrash* recounts the fate of Yehoyakim:

R. Nechemia taught: He took him and paraded him around all the cities of Israel, and killed him, and chopped him into pieces like olives, and cast them to the dogs. (*Vayikra Rabba* 19:6)

The *gemara* describes the fate of the kings who were subservient to Nevukhadnetzar as follows:

"How you have fallen from heaven, day-star, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you – who cast lots over nations..." – Rabba bar R. Huna said: This teaches that he [Nevukhadnetzar] would cast lots concerning the royal chiefs, to know whose turn it was for homosexual relations. (*Shabbat* 149b)

Perhaps *Chazal* attribute such activities to Nevukhadnetzar because we are told that his human heart was removed from him and replaced with the heart of a beast. Thus, he may have remained in the palace, and even continued to occupy the throne, while at the same time growing long hair and nails, appearing and behaving like a beast. Alternatively, he may have been thrown out of the palace on account of this degeneration.

There is yet another possibility, which has some support in some theories proposed by academic scholars. It may be that a coup d'etat took place in the palace and Nevukhadnetzar's wife, Shmirmith, daughter of the king of Mede, seized the throne. It is possible that she cast Nevukhadnetzar into prison, a pit unfit for human habitation, and there he lived in conditions fit for animals, without any possibility of cutting his nails or his hair.<sup>[5]</sup> This historical hypothesis is based on the fact that the walls of the palace in Babylon bear only the name of Shmirmith, not the name of

Nevukhadnetzar. *Chazal* indeed list Shmirmith as one of the four women who assumed power in the world.<sup>[6]</sup>

Perhaps Shmirmith reigned as regent for her son, Evil Merodakh. When Nevukhadnetzar regained the throne “seven seasons” later,<sup>[7]</sup> he put his son, who had reigned in his stead, in prison. It may be that Evil Merodakh met Yehoyakhin there, and that may explain why, when he rose to power, he released Yehoyakhin from prison, restored his honor, and set him in the royal palace for the rest of his life.<sup>[8]</sup> This hypothesis is based on two *midrashim*.<sup>[9]</sup>

A fourth possibility is related to a legend based on an Aramaic inscription found at Qumran, concerning the prayer of Nevuna'id, who suffered a plague of boils for seven years and lived in Tima, in the desert. He was healed by a Jewish sage who recognized the Supreme God.<sup>[10]</sup> The individual described in the legend is called Nevuna'id, and scholars have debated the meaning of his connection to Nevukhadnetzar. However, it may be that Nevuna'id is a general title – like Pharaoh or Artaxerxes – such that Nevukhadnetzar was the personal name of a certain Nevuna'id. This has been proposed by a minority of scholars.<sup>[11]</sup>

According to this view, Nevukhadnetzar's punishment parallels that meted out to Uzziyahu, king of Yehuda:

But when he was strong, his heart grew proud and corrupt, and he sinned against the Lord his God... and the leprosy broke out on his forehead before the priests in God's House, beside the incense altar of incense. And Azariah the chief priest, and all the priests, looked at him, and, behold, he was leprous on his forehead, and they took him quickly from there, and he himself also made haste to go out, because God had smitten him. And King Uzziah was a leper until the day of his death, for he was cut off from the house of God. And Yotam, his son, was over the king's house, judging the people of the land. (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* II 26:16-21)

However, Nevukhadnetzar's ultimate fate was different; he raised his eyes heavenward and prayed to God, and was ultimately restored to his throne.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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<sup>[1]</sup> In light of our previous conclusion that the image set up in the plain of Dura was in fact the image of Nevukhadnetzar, we may propose that just as the idol, or monument, was sixty cubits high, so the tree in this dream was the same height. Nevukhadnetzar is proud to be the “nourisher and sustainer of all, and beneficent to all,” as it were, like the tree. Perhaps this is the key to understanding the *midrash* of R. Elazar Ha-modai: “The manna that descended for *Bnei Yisrael* was sixty cubits high” (*Yoma* 76a) – teaching us that not only the nourishment represented by Nevukhadnetzar could reach a height of sixty cubits; so could the nourishment provided by God. The connection between the sustenance provided by Nevukhadnetzar to his subjects and the manna in the wilderness is also hinted to in the *gemara*: “So said Rabba bar Bar Chana in the name of R. Yochanan: ‘Our Rabbis taught: ‘*Bi-khedei man*’ [Only a sufficient

portion may be bought...]. How do we know that this term refers to food? As it is written: 'The king appointed for them (*va-yeman*)...' (*Daniel* 1:5)" (*Sukka* 39b). The verse cited here as proof speaks about the daily portion of food provided by Nevukhadnetzar for Daniel and his companions.

[2] Some Christian scholars adopted the interpretation that Nevukhadnetzar actually turned into a beast.

[3] Similarly, see R. Sa'adia Gaon, Abravanel (*ma'ayan* 6, *tamar* 5), and the Malbim (on verse 30).

[4] The *mishna* (*Kil'ayim* 8:5) may have this sort of situation in mind when it speaks of "*adnei ha-sadeh*" – which, according to the opinion of R. Yossi, "impart impurity of the tent, like a human corpse." Rambam adopts this understanding in his *Perush Ha-mishnayot*, ad loc. See also the *Arukh*, under "àï": the word "*adnei*" is simply a plural form of the word "adam," with an exchanging of the *mem* for a *nun*. There are many examples of the form àï being used in the sense of àï in several manuscripts of *Chazal's* writings. See, "*Adnei ha-Sadeh*," *Daf Keshet* for Yeshivat Har Etzion students 910 (5763).

[5] A coup of this sort was effected by Catherine the Great against her husband, Peter III. She forged an alliance with the brothers Orlov, who controlled the military and the royal court; her husband, the Czar, was subjected to humiliating living conditions and murdered by Catherine's loyalists just a few days later.

[6] See *Esther Rabba* 3:2.

[7] See Ibn Ezra (verse 28), who disagrees with R. Saadia Gaon concerning whether this means seven years or seven months.

[8] See the end of *Melakhim* II and the end of *Sefer Yirmiyahu*.

[9] "They said: Throughout those seven years that Nevukhadnetzar endured, they took Evil Merodakh and made him king in his stead. When [Nevukhadnetzar] returned, he was taken and put in prison. Anyone who entered prison in his time would never leave it alive... When [Nevukhadnetzar] died, they came back to Evil Merodakh to make him king. He said to them, 'I will not accede to you. The first time, I acceded to you – and he took me and put me in prison. Now, he will kill me.' And he would not believe them [and their report that Nevukhadnetzar was dead] until they dragged him and cast his corpse before him" (*Vayikra Rabba* 18:2). See also the different version in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 17:2.

[10] See Y. E'fal, "Nevukhadnetzar," *Encyclopedia Mikra'it* V (Jerusalem, 5728), pp. 737-8.

[11] See C. Chefetz, "*Malkhut Paras u-Maday bi-Tekufat Bayit Sheni u-Lefaneha – Iyun Mechadash*," *Megadim* 14 (5751), pp. 78-147 (as well as our article, "*Mavo le-Ma'amaro shel C. Chefetz al Malkhut Paras u-Maday*," *ibid.*, pp. 47-77.)