

**THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU**  
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**Shiur #16A:**  
**The Rise of Nevuchadnetzar and the Beginning of the Babylonian Era in**  
**the Prophecy of Yirmiyahu (Chapters 25-27)**

**INTRODUCTION**

Chapter 25 opens a new unit in the book of *Yirmiyahu*. The chapter begins with a note regarding the time period; the prophecy recorded in this chapter is the first dated prophecy in the book. In it, Yirmiyahu summarizes twenty-three years of prophecies through which he tried in vain to bring the people of Israel to repent and mend their ways. Now there begins a new era, in the center of which stands Nevuchadnetzar, king of Babylonia, who will eventually conquer the land of Yehuda. This trend continues in chapter 27, after Tzidkiyahu ascends to the throne, and Yirmiyahu once again warns about rebelling against Babylonia, imploring the kings to accept the yoke of the northern empire. Let us consider these two chapters, focusing on understanding the significance of the new era in Yirmiyahu's prophecy.

**THE YEAR 605 BCE AS A TURNING POINT IN THE BOOK OF**  
**YIRMIYAHU**

The prophecy begins with a note regarding the time: "In the fourth year of Yehoyakim the son of Yoshiyahu king of Yehuda, that was the first year of Nevuchadnetzar, king of Babylonia" (25:1). This date is mentioned four times in the book of *Yirmiyahu*, it being the most prominent and central date in the book.<sup>1</sup> That year, 605 BCE, was a turning point in the history of the ancient world in general, and in the history of Israel in particular. In 609 BCE, an extended conflict began between Egypt and Ashur, on one side, and Babylonia, the rising empire, on the other. Long battles were waged between Egypt and Ashur and Babylonia. The balance of forces in northern Mesopotamia was evenly matched, and it was difficult to know who would emerge victorious. In 605 BCE, a young king named Nevuchadnetzar ascended the throne of Babylonia, replacing his father Nevopolasser. That same year, Nevuchadnetzar captured the northern Egyptian stronghold when his army defeated the armies of Ashur and Egypt and inflicted upon them a

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to our chapter, this date is also mentioned in 26:1, which deals with Yirmeyahu's scroll of prophecies. As we will see there, the events occurring in that year and the summary found here are closely connected to Yirmeyahu's committing his prophecies to writing. This date is also mentioned in 45:1 and in the prophecy concerning Egypt in chapter 46, which will be mentioned below.

decisive blow at the crucial battle at Karkemish on the banks of the Euphrates (in today's Turkey).

This event is briefly described in II *Melakhim* 24:7:

And the king of Egypt came not again any more out of his land, for the king of Babylonia had taken from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates river all that pertained to the king of Egypt.

It is also described in greater detail in a Babylonian chronicle from the time of Nevuchadnetzar that records his campaigns in the first eleven years of his reign:<sup>2</sup>

In the twenty-first year [605/604], the king of Akkad [Nevopolassar] stayed in his own land, Nevuchadnetzar his eldest son, the crown-prince, mustered the Babylonian army and took command of his troops; he marched to Karkemish, which is on the bank of the Euphrates, and crossed the river to go against the Egyptian army, which lay in Karkemish. They fought with each other and the Egyptian army withdrew before him. He accomplished their defeat and beat them to non-existence... In the month of Ululu, Nevuchadnetzar returned to Babylonia, and on 1 Ululu he sat on the royal throne in Babylonia.

This victory opened the road before him, and he set out on a campaign of conquest to expand the Babylonian empire, in the course of which he also captured Ashkelon. Echoes of Nevuchadnetzar's victory can be heard in *Yirmiyahu* chapter 46, which opens a collection of prophecies directed at the nations:

Against Egypt, against the army of Pharaoh Nekho, king of Egypt, which was by the Euphrates River in Karkemish, whom Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylonia smote in the fourth year of Yehoyakim the son of Yoshiyahu king of Yehuda.

Against the background of these events, let us turn to the opening of the prophecy in chapter 25:

(3) From the thirteenth year of Yoshiyahu the son of Amon, king of Yehuda, and until this day, these twenty-three years, the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken to you, from morning till night; **but you have not hearkened.** (4) And the Lord has sent you all His servants the prophets, sending them from morning till night, **but you have not hearkened, nor inclined your ear to hear.** (5) They said: Turn back now everyone from his evil way and from the evil of your doings, and dwell in the land that the Lord has given to you and to your fathers forever and ever; (6) and do not go after other gods to serve them, and

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<sup>2</sup> This chronicle was discovered and published in 1956 by the British scholar Donald Wiseman, and it is named after him.

to worship them, and do not provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands, and I will do you no hurt. (7) Yet **you have not hearkened** to Me, says the Lord; that you might provoke Me to anger with the work of your hands to your own hurt. (8) Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Because **you have not heard** My words...

Yirmiyahu opens with a summary of the period of his prophecy from its beginning to the current year. The phrase "you have not hearkened/heard" is repeated five times in this section, and it accentuates the recurring refusal, over an extended period, to accept the words of the prophets. At first, Yirmiyahu speaks only of himself (3), but then he refers to other prophets as well – "all His servants the prophets" – highlighting the absolute refusal on the part of the people – "nor inclined your ear to hear." He closes with the conclusion that the people who have provoked their God and refused to listen to His prophets have brought evil upon themselves.

After twenty-three years of prophecy during which Yirmiyahu and his fellow prophets warned about the impending calamity, the geopolitical situation becomes clarified; the "enemy from the north" about whom Yirmiyahu had warned over the years of his prophecy takes on concrete form in the figure of Nevuchadnetzar, king of Babylonia, serving as God's agent, who will come and punish the people for their refusal to hear His words during those years.<sup>3</sup>

(9) Behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, says the Lord, and Nevuchadnetzar the king of Babylonia, My servant, and will bring them against this land, and against its inhabitants, and against all these nations round about, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, and a hissing and perpetual ruins. (10) Moreover, I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones, and the light of the lamp. (11) And this whole land shall be a ruin and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylonia for seventy years.

(12) And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylonia and that nation, says the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Kasdim, and will make it everlasting desolation. (13) And I will bring upon that land all My words which I have pronounced against it, all that is written in this book, which Yirmiyahu has prophesied against all the nations. (14) For many nations and great kings shall enslave them also; and I will recompense them according to their deeds, and according to the works of their own hands.

God refers to Nevuchadnetzar as "My servant" (9) and describes him as the one who will carry out His plans for the conquest and destruction of the land. On the other hand, he describes the harsh punishment that he will

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<sup>3</sup> Babylonia is located northeast of Jerusalem, but the battle of Karkemish was fought to the north of the city.

receive after seventy years (12-14). How are we to understand the complex attitude toward the Babylonian king that arises from our prophecy?

Seventy years of rule are allocated to Babylonian rule (11-12). This period of time appears to have symbolic meaning. In *Tehillim* 90:10 it says: "The days of our years are seventy." Thus, seventy years represent a generation. In *Yeshayahu* 23:15-17, this period of time is mentioned in reference to the exile and redemption of Tzor: "And it shall come to pass on that day, that Tzor shall be forgotten seventy years, according to the days of one king... And it shall come to pass after the end of seventy years, that the Lord will visit Tzor."<sup>4</sup> What this means, then, is that Babylonian rule will extend for a period corresponding to a generation, but at the conclusion of that period, everything will be reversed.

Note should be taken of Babylonia's punishment, measure for measure. Regarding Nevuchadnetzar's conquests it says: "And I will bring them against this land... and will make them... perpetual ruins." And parallel to this it says about Babylonia: "And I will make it everlasting desolation. And I will bring upon that land all My words." The Babylonians will subjugate the nations: "And these nations shall serve the king of Babylonia seventy years," and parallel to this: "For many nations and great kings shall enslave them also." This principle is spelled out explicitly at the end of the prophecy: "And I will recompense them according to their deeds and according to the works of their own hands."

## THE PROPHECY OF "THE WINE CUP OF FURY"

In the second part of the chapter (15-38), the calamity expands beyond the borders of Israel: "Take this wine cup of fury at My hand, and cause all the nations to whom I send you to drink it" (15). Yirmiyahu is commanded to perform a symbolic act representing the fall of the nations into the hands of Nevuchadnetzar – giving them to drink a "wine cup of fury," a poisoned cup of wine, which God will give the nations to drink and thereby bring about their collapse.<sup>5</sup> Yirmiyahu sees the Babylonian empire expanding to all these

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<sup>4</sup> The prophecy about the seventy years of exile appears here for the first time, and is repeated in 29:10. It served as the basis for the calculations regarding the end of days that were made in the exile (*Zekharya* 1:12). It was fulfilled precisely: The exile occurred in 586 BCE, and the building of the Second Temple took place in 516 BCE. According to another calculation, the seventy years extend from Nevuchadnetzar's rise to power in 605 BCE until Koresh's proclamation in 536 BC.

<sup>5</sup> The calamity that will befall the nations is symbolized by the drinking of a cup of poisoned wine. The symbolic significance of drinking the wine is spelled out explicitly in the verses: "Drink, and be drunk, and vomit, **and fall**" (25:27). Another meaning of the drinking of the cup of wine emerges from a comparison of the command to drink in our chapter: "**And cause all the nations to drink it... you shall certainly drink... and should you go utterly unpunished (*hinakeh tinaku*)? You shall not go unpunished,**" to what is stated in the section dealing with a *sota* (*Bamidbar* 5:19-24): "And if you have not gone aside... **be you free (*hinaki*)**... but if you have gone aside... when the Lord makes your thigh to fall away... **and he shall cause the woman to drink.**" Yirmeyahu (the priest) acts here as a priest who gives the *sota* water to drink, but in place of the *sota*, we are dealing here with all the nations. Drinking the wine is a sort of test of their guilt, and it brings their punishment upon them.

kingdoms. Here Yirmiyahu prophesies, for the first time in the book, about the nations – as he was told he would do in his prophecy of consecration.

Yirmiyahu provides a long list of nations and kings who will fall into the hands of Nevuchadnetzar, and he thus highlights the global revolution that will take place in the wake of his conquests. Attention should be paid to the order in which the kings are mentioned. He begins with Jerusalem and Yehuda (18) and moves to the nearby circles: Egypt, Pelishtim, Amon, Moav, and Edom (19-22), and ends with the more distant circles: the kings of Arav, the kings of Eilam and Madai, and others (23-26). The upheaval will begin in Yehuda, and the waves of destruction will then spread to the other kingdoms. This is what Yirmiyahu states explicitly at the end of the prophecy: "For, lo, I begin to bring evil on the city which is called by My name, and should you go utterly unpunished? You shall not go unpunished; for I will call for a sword upon all the inhabitants of the earth, says the Lord of hosts" (29).

The list concludes with an unusual formulation: "And the king of Sheshakh shall drink after them" (26). A kingdom named Sheshakh is not known to us, and it is likely that we are dealing with an allusion to the king of Babylonia, as proposed by the Radak: "And the king of Sheshakh – the king of Babylonia, and so in Targum Yonatan. Sheshakh (*shin-shin-kof*) is Babylonia (*Bavel = bet-bet-lamed*) in the *alef-tof, bet-shin* alphabet."

(Translated by David Strauss)