

THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU
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Shiur #14:

The Prophecies Regarding the Kings of the Davidic Dynasty (21:11-23:6)

Introduction

Four kings reigned in Yehuda after Yoshiyahu tragically died in the battle against Pharaoh Nekho at Megiddo. Yehoachaz, the son of Yoshiyahu, ruled for three months and was then exiled by Pharaoh Nekho. Yehoyakim, the son of Yoshiyahu, was king for eleven years. His son Yehoyakhin ruled for three months and was then exiled by the king of Babylon together with his mother. Tzidkiyahu, the son of Yoshiyahu, was the last of the kings of Yehuda; he ruled for eleven years and then rebelled against Babylonia, bringing destruction upon Jerusalem and the entire kingdom of Yehuda.

Chapters 21-23 constitute a collection of prophecies regarding the last kings of Yehuda. The collection opens with a general appeal to "the house of the king of Yehuda" (21:11-14), then shifts to general words of rebuke directed against the king of Yehuda (22:1-9), and afterwards prophecies disaster for Shalum-Yehoachaz (10-11), for Yehoyakim (13-19), and for Yehoyakhin (24-30). The collection ends with a prophecy of rebuke directed against the "shepherds" and a prediction of the emergence of "a righteous offshoot" from the house of David (23:1-6). In the course of these prophecies the prophet paints a picture of the ideal monarchy, which stands in sharp contrast to the corrupt moral state of the kingdom of his time.

While the prophecies in the first part of the book focused primarily on the religious dimension – idol worship and the betrayal of God – the prophecies in these chapters, which were delivered after the land was purified of idolatry in the days of Yoshiyahu, focus primarily on sins in the moral-social domain.

"Execute Judgment in the Morning" – The Heritage of the House of David (21:11-14)

(11) And to the house of the king of Yehuda, say: Hear the word of the Lord. (12) O house of David, thus says the Lord: Execute judgment in the morning, and deliver him that is robbed out of the hand of the oppressor, lest My fury go forth like fire and burn so that none can quench it because of the evil of your doings. (13) Behold, I am against you, O inhabitant of the valley, O rock of the plain, says the Lord; who say: Who shall come down against us? or Who shall enter into our

habitations? (14) But I will punish you according to the fruit of your doings, says the Lord; and I will kindle a fire in her forest, and it shall devour all that is round about her.

In this prophecy, unlike the other prophecies of Yirmiyahu, there is no hint as to the identity of the Davidic king to whom the prophecy is directed. The prophecy opens with a general appeal to "the house of the king of Yehuda" and continues with the general designation "house of David." The ambiguity here appears to be intentional, indicating that the prophecy is general in nature. The two distinctive features that appear here – the opening, "To the house of the king of Yehuda," and the reference to the continuation of the house of David – are found also in the coming prophecies:

Thus says the Lord: Go down to **the house of the king of Yehuda**, and speak there this word, and say: Hear the word of the Lord, O **king of Yehuda**, who sits upon **the throne of David**, you, and your servants, and your people that enter in by these gates. (22:1-2)

... Then shall there enter in by the gates of this house kings of the house **of David** sitting upon **his throne**. (22:4)

For thus says the Lord to **the house of the king of Yehuda**: You are as Gil'ad to Me, the summit of Lebanon; yet surely I will make you a wilderness, cities which are not inhabited. (22:6)

For no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon **the throne of David** and **ruling** any more **in Yehuda**. (22:30)

When I will raise **to David** a righteous offshoot, and he shall **reign as a king** and prosper. (23:5)

In other ways as well, this prophecy serves as an introduction to the detailed collection of prophecies that will follow. The reference to David, the father of the royal dynasty, becomes clear in the demand appearing in the continuation of the verse: "Execute judgment in the morning,¹ and deliver him that is robbed out of the hand of the oppressor." As noted by the Radak, executing judgment is one of the hallmarks of David as king:

He mentions David because he used to execute judgment, as it is stated: "And David executed judgment and justice to all his people" (II *Shemuel* 8:15). So too it was fitting that his sons and household should do the same and learn from his good deeds.

¹ The emphasis on "morning" is meant to underscore the primacy and the priority of executing judgment and justice in relation to the rest of the king's activities, and to place it above his personal needs. The Radak writes: "'Execute judgment in the morning' – in the morning before you engage in eating and drinking and your other needs, sit at the site of justice to adjudicate the matters of all those who come crying [for justice]. And similarly it was said about Moshe our master: 'And Moshe sat to judge the people from the morning.'"

The entire cited verse reads: "And David reigned over all Israel; and David executed judgment and justice to all his people." The verse creates a link between David's kingship over all Israel and executing judgment and justice to all the people. Executing judgment and justice is the trademark of the house of David, and it is mentioned later in connection with his son, Shelomo, who became famous for his rare wisdom in judgment: "May the Lord your God, be blessed, who delighted in you, to set you on the throne of Israel; because the Lord loved Israel forever, therefore He made you king, to do judgement and justice." (1 *Melakhim* 10:9). Here, too, doing judgment and justice is identified as the primary purpose of the king.

The combination of judgment and justice appears already earlier in another context – in the debate between God and Avraham about the destruction of Sedom. God opens his words to Avraham as follows (*Bereishit* 18:18-19): "Seeing that Avraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I know him, so that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment."

The prophet therefore demands of David's descendants, who are sitting on his throne, to continue his moral legacy, which is rooted, as stated, in the deeds of the patriarch Avraham. This demand is the foundation and the necessary condition for the continuation of the monarchy, as we see with David and Shelomo. As a result, in its absence, the royal throne is liable to collapse: "Lest My fury go forth like fire..."

The Prophecy at Gates of the House of the King (22:1-5)

In the next prophecy in the collection, Yirmiyahu is commanded to go down to the king of Yehuda and rebuke him:

(1) Thus says the Lord: Go down to the house of the king of Yehuda and speak there this word, (2) and say: Hear the word of the Lord, O king of Yehuda, that sits upon the throne of David, you, and your servants, and your people that enter in by these gates: (3) Thus says the Lord: Execute judgment and righteousness and deliver the robbed out of the hand of the oppressor; and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place. (4) For if you do this thing indeed, then shall there enter in by the gates of this house kings of the house of David sitting upon his throne, riding in chariots and on horse, he, and his servants, and his people. (5) But if you will not hear these words, I swear by Myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation.

The vague and general character of the previous prophecy is maintained here as well, and the name of the king is not explicitly mentioned. Here too the prophecy serves as a general warning to the kings of the house of Yehuda, whoever they may be. The earlier statements are spelled out here in greater detail. The opening, with its positive command, is identical to that in the previous prophecy: "**Execute** judgment and justice **and deliver** the

robbed out of the hand of the oppressor." To this are added negative commands: "And do **no** wrong, do **no** violence to the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow, **nor** shed innocent blood in this place." The results of the actions that were mentioned above are also spelled out in greater detail: "For if you do this thing... kings of the house of David sitting upon his throne... But if you will not hear... this house shall become a desolation."

In Yirmiyahu's prophecy regarding the kings of Yehuda, we hear the echoes of his prophecy regarding God's house in chapter 7:

The prophecy regarding the house of God	The prophecy regarding the kings of the house of David
<p>(2) Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say: Hear the word of the Lord, all Yehuda, that enter in at these gates to worship the Lord... (5) For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if you thoroughly execute justice between a man and his neighbor; (6) if you oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt; (7) then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, forever and ever... (14) Therefore will I do to this house, which is called by My name... as I have done to Shilo.</p>	<p>(1) Thus says the Lord: Go down to the house of the king of Yehuda, and speak there this word, (2) and say: Hear the word of the Lord, O king of Yehuda, that sits upon the throne of David, you, and your servants, and your people that enter in by these gates: (3) Thus says the Lord: Execute judgment and righteousness, and deliver the robbed out of the hand of the oppressor; and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place. (4) For if you do this thing indeed, then shall there enter in by the gates of this house kings... I swear by Myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation.</p>

The great similarity between these two prophecies is not by chance. In the two prophecies, Yirmiyahu attacks two key institutions: the religious institution – the Temple – and the national institution – the Davidic monarchy, and he challenges the very existence of two houses – the house of God and the house of the king. These two institutions are perceived by the people as stable, absolute, and unassailable. Both rely on a Divine promise regarding their eternity, and the two promises are intertwined. Thus, for example, Shelomo relates in the prayer that he offers at the time of the dedication of the Temple to the twofold selection of the house of David and of Jerusalem and the Temple (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 6:5-6):

Since the day that I brought My people out of the land of Egypt, I chose no city among all the tribes of Israel to build a house in, that My name might be there; nor did I choose any man to be a ruler over My people Israel. But I have chosen Jerusalem, that My name might be there; and have chosen David to be over My people Israel.

The deep connection between the eternity of Jerusalem and the eternity of the house of David also appears in Yeshayahu's prophecy about the fall of the Assyrian army (*Yeshayahu* 37:35):

For I will defend this city to save it for My own sake, and for My servant David's sake.

The widespread misconception among the people about the unconditional eternity of the Temple was rejected in Yirmiyahu's prophecy in chapter 7, and now the corresponding misconception regarding the unconditional eternity of the Davidic dynasty is rejected. Yirmiyahu continues here with the same critical line, emphasizing that the dynastic monarchy is not a certain and self-evident given. The biological continuity of the descendants of David does not in itself entitle them to the kingdom, but only when coupled with its moral continuity. Only then can they truly sit on the throne of David. In contrast, the non-realization of the moral purpose will lead to the destruction of the house of David, just as it will lead to the destruction of the house of God.

Another prophecy that echoes here is the prophecy regarding Shabbat in chapter 17:

1. Both prophecies are delivered at gates. The gates of Jerusalem: "Hear the word of the Lord, you kings of Yehuda, and all Yehuda, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, that enter in by these gates;" and the gates of the house of the king: "Hear the word of the Lord, O king of Yehuda, that sits upon the throne of David, you, and your servants, and your people that enter in by these gates."

2. In both prophecies, the reward is also connected to the gates. Chapter 17 describes the arrival of kings and princes in Jerusalem, which expresses the eternity and independence of the city: "Then shall enter into the gates of this city kings and princes who sit upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their princes, the men of Yehuda, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and this city shall remain forever." Chapter 22 describes arrival at the gates of the house of the king, which expresses his rule and sovereignty: "Then shall enter in by the gates of this house kings of the house of David sitting upon his throne, riding in chariots and on horses, he and his servants, and his people."

In the ancient world, the city gates and the plaza before them were the focus of public life in the city. The gate was the most appropriate place for public activities that bring together large numbers of people.² The archaeological findings indicate that in close proximity to the city gates stood

² The role of the gate has been the subject of extensive and detailed archaeological and historical research. For an up-to-date summary and references to the major studies in this area, see A. Faust, *Ha-Chevra Ha-Yisraelit Be-Tekufat Ha-Melukha* (Jerusalem, 5765), pp. 111-122.

various public buildings. The two main public activities that were conducted there were trade and economic activity and judicial proceedings and punishment. Thus, for example, the Torah commands in *Devarim* (16:18): "Judges and officers shall you make you in all your **gates**, which the Lord your God gives you, throughout your tribes, and they shall judge the people with **righteous judgment**." The fact that judicial proceedings took place by the gates follows from numerous accounts in the Bible and outside it. Thus we find that Lot sat at the gate of Sodom and that Boaz conducted the redemption procedure at the gate of his city (*Ruth* 4:1-2): "Then Boaz went up to the **gate** and sat down there; and, behold, the kinsman of whom Boaz spoke came by, unto whom he said, 'Ho there, so and so! Turn aside, sit down here.' And he turned aside and sat down. And he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, 'Sit down here.' And they sat down." There are many more examples as well. Similarly, there is ample evidence of economic activity being conducted at the city gate.

Thus, these two prophecies deal with two major aspects of the gates, essentially two main conditions for the survival of Jerusalem and the kingdom of David. The gates in chapter 17 symbolize the preservation of the spiritual and cultural character of the city, in the form of resting from work and commercial activity on Shabbat. In chapter 22, the gates express the exercise of judgment and justice in the city, a task entrusted to the king.

It should be noted that the expression "judgment and justice" has another meaning in Scripture. M. Weinfeld has observed that the expression appears many times in Scripture in connection with "mercy and compassion,"³ the aim of which is to benefit the disadvantaged. In a national context, this means actions undertaken on behalf of the poor and the weaker sectors of the population, by way of social reforms instituted by the king:

A distinction should be made between "righteous judgment" (*mishpat tzedek*) and "judgment and justice" (*mishpat u-tzedaka*). The first indicates issuing a righteous ruling in court, as may be understood from *Devarim* 16:18 (compare with *Vayikra* 19:15). The second expression, although it is made up of two terms, refers to one thing: social justice and equality... "Justice" (*tzedaka*) is connected to actions (see, for example, *Yeshayahu* 51:2, 56:1, and the phrase "he executed justice"), and in a later period it even received the practical meaning of doing acts of lovingkindness for the poor... The prophets, when they speak of "judgment and justice," are certainly not referring to the execution of acts of lovingkindness at the time of issuing a ruling, and it goes without saying that they are not referring merely to issuing a just ruling. Indeed, if we examine the verses that raise the idea of judgment and justice in the prophetic and psalmic literature, it appears that the meaning of the concept is not limited in any way to a judicial act. On the contrary, the concept is essentially directed at improving the conditions of the poor and indigent, undoubtedly by way of reforms that the king and his officers are in charge of, and not specifically by way of helping the poor

³ M. Weinfeld, *Mishpat U-Tzedaka Be-Yisrael U-Be'amim* (Jerusalem, 5745), pp. 18-19.

in his dispute with his oppressor... Indeed, this understanding of the words "judgment and justice" rises from the rebukes of the prophets. When Mikha mentions God's ideal demands of man and says: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord does require of you, **but to do justly, and to love true loyalty**, and to walk humbly with your God." (*Mikha* 6:8), he is not referring... to issuing a just ruling, for (a) his appeal is directed at **all men**, and not everyone is a judge... (b) The last two demands, "lovingkindness" and "humble walking," teach us that his demand is a general moral demand that calls for good deeds and "executing judgment" as a term for acts of social justice. The same is true of Amos, who demands: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (*Amos* 5:24). If we examine the matter about which these prophets are admonishing the people, we see that the primary injustice in their eyes is not the miscarriage of justice carried out by a court, but rather the oppression and exploitation of the downtrodden on the part of the wealthy landowners and the ruling class, who control the social order of the economy...

Based on this, A. Faust⁴ has proposed that in the prophecy at the gate assumes another role: the gate is the place where social support and justice for the poor is realized. This follows from the breakdown of the obligations of the king in our prophecy, which focus primarily on helping the weak – the stranger, the orphan and the widow. Indeed, we find in several places that the city gate is also the location of the weak of society. Thus, for example, in *Devarim* 16:14: "And you shall rejoice in your feast, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite, the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, that are within your gates." Support and assistance to the poor and the stranger, the orphan and the widow, who are at the gate are also included among the main foundations of society and its existence.

The Prophecy Regarding Shalum (10-12)

(10) Weep not for the dead, neither bemoan him; but weep sore for him that goes away, for he shall return **no more**, nor see his native land.
(11) For thus says the Lord concerning Shalum the son of Yoshiyahu king of Yehuda, who reigned instead of Yoshiyahu his father, who went forth out of this place: He shall **not** return there **anymore**; (12) but he shall die in the place to which they have led him into exile, and shall see this land **no more**.

This prophecy refers to the son of Yoshiyahu, Shalum. There is no mention of any king by this name in the book of *Melakhim*. Since we are dealing with a king who was exiled, some identify him with Yehoachaz the son of Yoshiyahu, who was exiled to Egypt shortly after the death of his father Yoshiyahu in a battle waged against Pharaoh Necho, after having ruled as

⁴ In his aforementioned book, note 2 above.

king for only three months.⁵ In this prophecy, Yirmiyahu does not castigate the king, as he hardly had a chance to act as king before being dismissed and his dismissal was not his fault. On the other hand, the prophecy emphasizes the tragedy of exile, which is more severe than death. The threefold repetition of the phrase "no more" sharply illustrates the disconnection of an exile from his homeland.⁶ In this short prophecy, Yirmiyahu emphasizes the exile of Yehoachaz as the beginning of a new period in the history of the kingdom of Yehuda – the appointment of a king by a foreign ruler, which signifies the loss of independence, and the exile of the king, which marks the beginning of the future exile of the people.

"Woe to Him that Builds His House by Unrighteousness": The Prophecy Regarding Yehoyakim

The note of hope that was woven into the first prophecy to the king of Yehuda fades in the coming prophecies, when the kings of Yehuda continue in their evil ways. In contrast to the ideal description of the monarch at the beginning of the chapter, Yirmiyahu traces the debased moral situation in the days of Yehoyakim (22:13-19):

(13) Woe to him that builds his house by unrighteousness and his chambers by injustice, who uses his neighbor's service without wages and gives him not for his hire; (14) who says, "I will build me a wide house with large upper chambers," and he cuts him out windows; and it is covered with rafters of cedar, and painted with vermilion. (15) Shall you reign because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do judgment and justice and then it was well with him? (16) He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him. Was not this to know Me? says the lord. (17) But you have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain, and for shedding innocent blood, and for oppression, and for practicing violence. (18) Therefore, thus says the Lord concerning Yehoyakim the son of Yoshiyahu king of Yehuda: They shall not lament for him, saying: Ah my brother! or, Ah sister! They shall not lament for him saying: Ah lord! or, Ah his glory! (19) He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

This rebuke revolves around the building of Yehoyakim's magnificent royal palace, which involved the breach of the most fundamental principles of morality and justice. Let us trace the charges that Yirmiyahu hurls at Yehoyakim and note their growing severity. Yirmiyahu first accuses Yehoyakim of constructing his palace through exploitation, failing to pay his

⁵ This identification fits in nicely with the order of the kings in the collection, but does not accord with what is stated in I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 3:15. *Chazal* identified him with Tzidkiyahu, who was exiled in the aftermath of the conquest of Jerusalem. Radak suggests that Shalum is Yehoyakhin, but Yehoyakhin is explicitly mentioned later in the prophecy. For a detailed discussion of the various positions, see the summary of the prophecy in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary to *Yirmiyahu*, pp. 276-277.

⁶ A similar expression regarding the absoluteness of the exile and the futility of repentance is found in the third prophecy concerning the exiled Yekhonya.

workers their rightful wages: "Who uses his neighbor's service without wages and gives him not for his hire." In the next verse, he "quotes" the words of Yehoyakim, who chases after the magnificence and splendor of the palace that he wishes to build. Finally, he charges that his only desires are dishonest gain, shedding blood, and oppression. Yehoyakim's distorted scale of values sets at the top filling the needs and desires of the king, who exploits his subjects to accomplish this end and does not recoil from employing all means to achieve his base goals. He believes that the larger and the more luxurious his palace, the more established his kingdom will be.

This perception stands in sharp contrast to the rebukes that Yirmiyahu directed at the kings of the house of David. At the heart of the prophecy Yirmiyahu draws a comparison between the kingdom of Yehoyakim and that of his father Yoshiyahu and that of the kings of the house of David in general. At the top of the scale of values that is fit for a king stands "knowing God," from which stem doing judgment and justice and the laws governing the poor and the needy. "Then it was well with him." The king need not lead an ascetic life and mortify himself – "Did not your father eat and drink and do judgment and justice."⁷ But he ought to distinguish between what is truly important and what is of secondary importance. Yehoyakim has lost the criteria for making such a distinction, and has turned the means available to the king and his economic and political power into the sole goal that stands on its own: "But you have eyes and heart **only** for oppression and for practicing violence." Thus, the "house of the king" is being built, metaphorically and literally, on the systematic violation of the principal purpose for which he was crowned king – doing judgment and justice. A royal house such as this, which seriously veers from the principles of the "house of David," has no right to exist. Therefore, Yehoyakim will be severely punished with a despicable death, without eulogy or proper burial.⁸ The king who scorned the sanctity of judgment and justice at the gates of Jerusalem will be drawn and cast forward beyond the gates of Jerusalem.⁹

⁷ See, for example, the words of Radak: "'Did not your father eat and drink, and do judgment and justice' – that is to say, I will not catch you for your pleasures, if you do judgment and justice, for your father Yoshiyahu ate and drank in the manner of kings and enjoyed his good, but since he did judgment and justice, it was well with him, and it was good all his life. But you derive pleasure from this world in an evil manner, for the buildings from which you derive pleasure were not built with righteousness and justice, but with oppression. And similarly your food and your drink and the rest of your pleasures are through violence, as he says: 'But you have eyes and heart only for you dishonest gain.'"

⁸ The expression "the burial of an ass," coined by Yirmiyahu in our prophecy, eventually became a classic expression for an improper and contemptible burial.

⁹ In the 1950s, the archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni conducted an excavation near Kibbutz Ramat Rachel in southeast Jerusalem, and one of his important findings was a palace that he attributed to one of the last kings of Yehuda. According to Aharoni, this is the palace of Yehoyakim against which Yirmiyahu directed his prophecy of reproach. Here are some excerpts from what he said about the matter: "I think that the palace of Yehoyakim, that building the construction of which the prophet so strongly condemned and which he saw as one of his immoral acts, that ran contrary to his way of thinking, was found by surprise in the excavations conducted in Ramat Rachel... We did not expect this when we went to excavate, that outside Jerusalem of that time, somewhere in the middle between Jerusalem and Bet-Lechem, one of the kings of Yehuda would build a royal fortress and palace. The important question in our eyes is not the identification, but the very surprising fact that in that place an

"Is this Man Konyahu a Despised Broken Vessel": The Prophecy Regarding Yekhonya

The third prophecy (20-30) is directed at Yekhonya (that is, Yehoyakhin), who ruled after Yehoyakim. The first part of the prophecy deals with the short period of Yekhonya's reign and describes Yirmiyahu's warnings not to rebel against Babylonia, and the revolt and the bitter consequences. We will focus on the second part, which deals directly with Yekhonya:

(24) As I live, says the Lord, though Khonyahu the son of Yehoyakim king of Yehuda were the signet upon My right **hand**, yet would I tear you off; (25) and I will give you into the **hand** of those that seek your life, and into the **hand** of those whose face you fear, even into the **hand** of Nevukhadnetzar king of Babylonia, and into the **hand** of the Kasdim. (26) And I will cast you out, and your mother that bore you, into another country, where you were not born; and there you shall die. (27) But to the land to which they desire to return, to it shall they not return.

Like Yehoachaz, Yekhonya was punished with exile at the hands of the king of Babylonia. The prophecy opens with a firm oath, which emphasizes the absolute nature of the decree: Even were Yekhonya a signet on the right hand of God – which symbolizes personal connection and deep love, as in *Shir Ha-Shirim* 8:6: "Set me as a signet upon your heart, as a signet upon

especially magnificent royal palace was built, as is proven by the findings... My suggestion to identify his house with the palace in Ramat Rachel is based first and foremost on the dating of the building. Scripture does not say where that house was and it is generally assumed that it was built in Jerusalem itself, in the area where royal palaces were built since the days of David and Shelomo. Or perhaps there is an allusion in the words of the prophet: 'And cast forward beyond the gates of Jerusalem,' that the prophet sees before him a palace outside the city, and says: Just as you built your palace outside the city, so in the end you will be cast out of the gates of Jerusalem. We are dealing here with an unusual phenomenon in itself, that one of the kings of Yehuda builds a palace for himself outside the city. As we see from the few remnants that have been preserved, this was undoubtedly one of the most magnificent palaces that was built in accordance with the finest architecture and craftsmanship of the time, the likes of which are found in archaeological research only in the palaces of the kings of Israel built in Shomeron, Megiddo, and Chatzor. This gives rise to the question: Which of the kings of Yehuda went off suddenly and built for himself a palace so large and splendid outside Jerusalem, and why did he do so?...

What does Yirmiyahu say? 'Woe to him that builds his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by injustice; that uses his neighbor's service without wages, and give him not for his hire; that says, I will build me a wide house with large upper chambers, etc.' The prophet accuses the king that in that exceedingly grave and difficult time in the land, he is not deterred from bringing in forced laborers and building a grand royal house, setting up a wide house, with large upper chambers, a grand palace, 'and cuts him out windows, and it is covered with rafters of cedar, and painted with vermilion.' Is it too bold to suggest that the window railings found in the excavations belong to the windows described here by the prophet? On the white limestone there are preserved traces of red paint – vermilion – and at the top, as stated, holes for connecting wooden walls – rafters of cedar. In the recent excavations in Be'er-Sheva, many cedar artifacts, brought most certainly from Lebanon, were found in the royal construction from the days of Uziyahu." For his full remarks, see: <http://lib.cet.ac.il/pages/item.asp?item=7675>.

your arm" – he would be torn off God's hand and cast into the hands of those who seek his life and into exile in the land of the Kasdim.¹⁰ In verses 26-27, the prophet emphasizes the absolute disconnection between his country and natural homeland and the land to which he will be exiled. He and his mother, "who bore you," will be cast into a country where they were not born (and in the continuation, to "a land which they know not"). The disconnection is absolute: Both of them will die in a foreign land and not merit returning to the land to which they desire to return.

Yirmiyahu seems to be alluding here to the prophecies of the false prophets, who prophesied that those who were exiled with Yekhonya would speedily return to their land, and thus he shatters the false hopes that they raised among the exiles, as we shall see later in the book. Yirmiyahu emphasizes here, and reiterates below, that the exile is a long and stable reality that will not change any time soon.

In the next section, he intensifies the tragedy of the punishment of exile, and his words sound a tone of sadness over Yekhonya's bitter fate. His words are phrased like a lament: "Is this man Konyahu¹¹ a despised broken vessel, an object that no one cares for? Why are they cast out, he and his seed, and banished to a land which they know not?" (See, for example, *Yirmiyahu* 2:14: "Is Israel a servant? Is he a homeborn slave? Why is he become a prey?"). Like the previous section, which anchored Yekhonya's fate with a Divine oath ("As I live, says the Lord..."), here too the section ends with the resolute wording of a decree:

(29) O land, land, land, hear the word of the Lord. (30) Thus says the Lord: Write this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days, for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Yehuda.

This section clarifies that the sentence imposed upon Yekhonya is even more severe. Not only will Yekhonya and his mother not return to their land, but no seed of Yekhonya will grow into a scion that will continue the dynasty of the house of David. The breach of the legacy of the house of David will result in the cutting off of the seed of David from the house of Yekhonya.

Several generations later, during the period of the return to Zion, the prophet Chaggai delivered a prophecy paralleling that of Yirmiyahu, but the opposite of it (*Chaggai* 2:23):

On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubavel, My servant, the son of She'altiel, says the Lord, and will make you like a **signet ring**; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts.

¹⁰ The word "yad" is repeated five times in this section, the first time in connection with the hand of God, and the next four times in reference to the hand of the Babylonian enemies.

¹¹ That is to say, is Yekhonya a broken and despicable vessel that is beyond repair, and is thrown carelessly into the trash?

As stated in I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* (3:17), She'altiel, the father of Zerubavel, was the son of Yekhonya:

(15) And the sons of Yoshiyahu were the firstborn Yochanan, the second Yehoyakim, the third Tzidkiyahu, the fourth Shalum. (16) And the sons of Yehoyakim: Yekhonya his son, Tzidkiya his son. (17) And the sons of Yekhonya: Assir, She'altiel his son.

It turns out that a grandson of Yekhonya, who was decreed would be childless, returns to the land of Israel and even serves as sort of a Jewish leader from the seed of David! Chaggai uses the same metaphor as did Yirmiyahu – a signet – to express the return of a descendant of Yekhonya to his place.

Chazal dealt with this contradiction with a daring claim (*Pesikta De-Rav Kahana* 24):

I accepted Yekhonya's repentance, and your repentance I should not accept? R. Meir said: The Holy One, blessed is He, swore that he would not raise a king from Yekhonya the son of Yehoyakim king of Yehuda. This is what is written: "Though Khonyahu the son of Yehoyakim king of Yehuda were the signet upon My right hand, yet would I tear you off (*etkankha*)." R. Chananya the son of R. Yitzchak said: From there I will tear off the kingdom of the house of David. Another explanation: It is not written here *etekkha*, but rather *etkankha* – I will repair you with repentance. From the site of his tearing off shall be his repair.... R. Acha the son of Abun the son of Binyamin said in the name of R. Abba the son of R. Pappa: Great is the power of repentance, which cancels an oath and cancels a decree. That it cancels an oath, from where? "As I live, says the Lord, though Khonyahu the son of Yehoyakim, etc." and it is written: "On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubavel, My servant, the son of She'altiel, etc." That it cancelled a decree, from where? "Thus says the Lord, Write this man childless, etc." "And the sons of Yekhonya: Assir, etc."¹²

"A Righteous Offshoot": Tzidkiyahu – the Failed Messiah (23:1-6)

The collection of prophecies concerning the kings of the house of David ends with a positive and optimistic prophecy:

(1) Woe to the shepherds that destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture! says the Lord. (2) Therefore, thus says the Lord God of Israel against the shepherds that feed My people: You have scattered My flock, and driven them away, and have not taken care of them; behold, I will punish you for the evil of your doings, says the Lord. (3) And I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries into which I have

¹² The *midrash* describes Yekhonya's repentance in his prison cell in Babylonia. See *Vayikra Rabba* 19.

driven them, and will bring them back to their folds, and they shall be fruitful and increase. (4) And I will set up shepherds over them who shall feed them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be lacking, says the Lord. (5) Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise to David a righteous offshoot, and he shall reign as a king and prosper,¹³ and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. (6) In his day, Yehuda shall be saved and Israel shall dwell safely; and this is his name whereby he shall be called, The Lord is our righteousness.

The prophecy opens with rebuke of the failed leaders, who are likened to shepherds who destroyed and scattered the sheep,¹⁴ and thus it constitutes a dismal summary of the activities of the three Davidic kings who were mentioned earlier. In contrast to what they did, God promises that He Himself will act as a faithful shepherd, gathering the stray sheep, returning them to their folds, and setting up faithful shepherds in place of those that failed. The general promise regarding the setting up of the shepherds: "And **I will set up (va-hakimoti)** shepherds over them who shall feed them," is realized in the figure of a specific shepherd: "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when **I will raise (va-hakimoti)** to David a righteous offshoot..." This stands in striking contrast to the previous prophecy concerning Yehoachaz: A fitting leader for the people will not issue from the seed of Yehoachaz, but such a leader will issue from somewhere else, and he will be a worthy heir of the house of David who will do judgment and justice in the earth. Who is this future leader?

This prophecy seems to be referring to Matanya, i.e., Tzidkiyahu, the last king of Yehuda. One proof of this is that the three previous prophecies dealt with the three kings who preceded him. In addition, the name "The Lord is our righteousness," is reminiscent of the name given to Matanya by Nevuchadnetzar – Tzidkiyahu. On the other hand, Tzidkiyahu did not fulfill the destiny described here. Furthermore, the style of the prophecy is similar to prophecies concerning the end of days; the phrase "Behold, days are coming," and the wording parallels the wording of the prophecy concerning the end of days in chapter 3 (14-17). Attention should also be paid to the relationship between our prophecy and Yeshayahu's prophecy about the branch that will grow for the house of David (11:1-5):

(1) And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Yishai, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. (2) And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. (3) And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither decide after the hearing of his ears: (4) but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide

¹³ A similar expression is used in connection with David in I *Shemuel* 18:14: "And David succeeded in all his ways."

¹⁴ The prophecy of rebuke directed against Yehoyakim also opened with the word "*hoy*," woe: "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness."

with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. (5) And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. (6) The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion, and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

Note should be taken of the shared botanical metaphor: rod and branch, and offshoot. The purpose of that branch is also described in similar terms: doing judgment and justice in the land.

Perhaps, then, this prophecy was delivered in the early days of Tzidkiyahu, and perhaps at the beginning, Yirmiyahu saw him as a fitting candidate for executing reforms and restoring justice and judgment to the kingdom of Yehuda. The complex relations between Yirmiyahu and Tzidkiyahu are spelled out in detail later in the book. Ultimately, however, Tzidkiyahu failed and did not fulfill the hopes that had been attached to him. He buckled to the heavy pressure exerted by his officers, and chose to disobey the prophet and rebel against Babylonia, thus leading to the final destruction of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Yehuda. At that point, prophecy shifted to a more distant plane, to the future redemption at the end of days.

The Rambam says something like this in principle in *Hilkhot Melakhim* (11:4):

If a king will arise from the house of David who diligently contemplates the Torah and observes its commandments as prescribed by the Written Law and the Oral Law as David, his ancestor, will compel all of Israel to walk in (the way of the Torah) and rectify the breaches in its observance, and fight the wars of God, **we may, with assurance, consider him the Messiah.**

If he succeeds in the above, builds the Temple in its place, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, he is definitely the Messiah...

If he did not succeed to this degree or was killed, **he surely is not the redeemer promised by the Torah.** Rather, he should be considered as all the other proper and complete kings of the Davidic dynasty who died.¹⁵

(Translated by David Strauss)

¹⁵ Alternatively, it is possible that the prophecy was delivered after Tzidkiyahu failed, and Yirmiyahu wished to offer an alternative to him. That is to say, as opposed to Tzidkiyahu, who did not live up to his name and failed to do justice in his land, the future Messiah will indeed act in this manner. See *Da'at Mikra* commentary to *Yirmiyahu*, p. 291.