

THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU
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**This shiur is dedicated *le-zekher nishmot* Amelia Ray and Morris Ray
by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray**

**Shiur #18: The Prophecy Concerning The Exiles In Bavel -
Yirmiyahu 29**

Introduction: The Exile of Yekhonya

In continuation of his struggle against the false prophets described in the previous chapters, in chapter 29 Yirmiyahu deals with the false prophecies that were current among the exiles in Bavel who were exiled with Yekhonya. In order to understand the prophecy, we must first provide some background regarding the exile of Yekhonya.

Following the death of Yehoyakim, his son Yehoyakhin (or Yekhonya) ruled as king for only three months and ten days. After Nevuchadnetzar laid siege around Jerusalem, Yehoyakhin surrendered and opened the gates of the city before him (II *Melakhim* 24):

(10) At that time, the servants of Nevukhadnetzar king of Bavel came up against Jerusalem, and the city was besieged. (11) And Nevukhadnetzar king of Bavel came against the city, and his servants besieged it. (12) And Yehoyakhin the king of Yehuda went out to the king of Bavel, he, and his mother, and his servants, and his princes, and his officers; and the king of Bavel took him in the eighth year of his reign. (13) And he carried out from there all the treasures of the house of the Lord... (14) And he carried away all Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the mighty warriors, ten thousand exiles, and all the craftsmen, and the smiths; none remained, save the poorest sort of the people of the land. (15) And he carried away Yehoyakhin to Bavel, and the king's mother, and the king's wives and his officers, and the mighty of the land, those he took away into exile from Jerusalem to Bavel... (17) And the king of Bavel made Matanya his father's brother king in his stead, and changed his name to Tzidkiyahu.

Nevuchadnetzar exiled Yehoyakhin and his family to Bavel, and along with them he exiled the princes and those involved in the arms industry – "the craftsmen and smiths" – in order to weaken the military and political power in Yehuda and to break the opposition and the possibility of some future

rebellion against him. Nevuchadnetzar also took some of the Temple vessels as booty, and their restoration stands at the heart of the prophecies of the false prophets.

In the interim period between the exile of Yekhonya and the exile of Yehuda in the days of Tzidkiyahu, a complex situation was created in which there were two Jewish centers: one in Bavel, which included the elite of Jerusalem, and one in Jerusalem, where the poorest of the people of the land remained. There is a king in both centers: Yehoyakhin in Bavel and Tzidkiyahu in Jerusalem. This complex situation raised the question of the status of each center and the relationship between them.

It is possible to identify several positions that arose during that period regarding these questions.¹ One position emerges from the words of the people who remained in *Eretz Yisrael*, as described in *Sefer Yechezkel* (11:15-16):²

(15) Son of man, your brethren, your brothers, your next of kin, and all the house of Israel entire are they to whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said: Get you far from the Lord; to us is this land given in possession. (16) Therefore say: Thus says the Lord God: Although I have cast them far off among the nations, and although I have scattered them among the countries, I have been to them a little sanctuary in the countries where they have come.

The clear precedent that underlies this perception is that of the exile of the ten tribes, who indeed completely detached themselves from the people living in *Eretz Yisrael*. This perception arises also in Bavel among the elders of Israel who come to Yechezkel thinking that the covenant between God and Israel has been annulled and that they should now integrate themselves among the nations (*Yechezkel* 20:32-34).

In contrast stands the opposite position, expressed primarily in the words of the false prophets, which views the exile as a temporary and fleeting event that will come to a close in the near future. This view is evident, for example, in the words of Chananya son of Azur, who proclaims the end of the exile "in another two years." This perception is also expressed in the words of the false prophets in Bavel, as we will see below. The mood of the exiles was apparently affected by the optimistic view of the false prophets, who predicted the impending end of the exile and the return to Jerusalem.

The common denominator of these two positions is the perception of the exile as an absolute and final event; the difference relates to whether or not the present reality of the partial exile of Yekhonya should be viewed as an exile. In contrast to these two positions, Yirmiyahu proposes a third possibility,

¹ See Y. Elitzur, "Shenei Nevi'im Mul Arba Miflagot," in *Yisrael Ve-Hamikra* (Jerusalem, 5760).

² Similar statements are found in chapter 33; opinions are divided as to whether they refer to the period after the destruction of the Temple or to the period after the exile of Yekhonya. See Elitzur (previous note).

one that is different and more complex. Yirmiyahu argues that the exile is not a passing event, but rather a significant one. It is a long and extended process for which preparation is necessary. The people must settle into it and build upon it, while knowing that its goal is the return to *Eretz Yisrael* in another seventy years. This complex message stands at the center of the Yirmiyahu's prophecy in chapter 29.

Introduction (1-3) – “the Words of the Letter”

(1) Now these are the words of the letter that Yirmeya the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the remnant of the elders who were carried away captives, and to the priests, and to the prophets, and to all the people **whom Nevuchadnetzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Bavel** (2) (after Yekhonya the king, and the queen mother, and the officers, the princes of Yehuda and Jerusalem, and the craftsmen and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem). (3) By the hand of El'asa the son of Shefan and Gemarya the son of Chilkiya (whom Tzidkiya king of Yehuda had sent to Nevuchadnetzar king of Bavel) to Bavel saying:

In the first part of the chapter, a presentation is made of Yirmiyahu's letter to the exiles in Bavel, which was meant, as stated, to deal with the false prophets in the exile of Bavel. In effect, the entire chapter documents the correspondence between the two sides.

One interesting point that arises from verse 3 relates to the identity of the exiles El'asa and Gemarya were sent, according to what is stated here, by Tzidkiyahu to Nevuchadnetzar, and Yirmiyahu uses them to send his letter as well. El'asa is apparently the son of Shafan the scribe, into whose hands Chilkiyahu the High Priest handed over the Torah scroll that had been found in the Temple in the days of Yoshiyahu. Another son of Shafan, Achikam, saved Yirmiyahu from the hands of the priests who wished to kill him, as we learned in chapter 26. The members of Shafan's family apparently belonged to the circle of Yirmiyahu's followers. Indeed, Shafan's grandson, Mikhiyahu, will in chapter 36 pass on information about another book of Yirmiyahu's prophecies.

The letter's addressees are mentioned also in verse 4 in a slightly different formulation:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all that are carried away captives, **whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Bavel.**

In verse 1, which reflects the "objective" reality, it says, "Whom Nevuchadnetzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Bavel," whereas in verse 4, which precedes the substance of the prophecy it says, "Whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Bavel." This is meant to teach the exiles that their exile is not merely a political event; rather, it is God who caused them to be exiled from Jerusalem. This is the foundation of the

continuation of the prophecy – accepting the yoke of the king of Bavel and establishing themselves in the exile.

Guidelines for the Exiles

Yirmiyahu's letter to the exiles in Bavel opens with a series of guidelines, which are divided into two parts. The first part includes three guidelines (5-6):

Build houses – and dwell in them
Plant gardens – and eat the fruit of them
Take wives – and beget sons and daughters
And take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands,
that they may bear sons and daughters, that you may be increased
there, and not diminished.

The guidelines in verses 5-6 parallel the opposite descriptions in the Torah section recording the curses in *Devarim* 28:30-32 and those relating to those who are sent back from the battle front in *Devarim* 20: "What man is there that has built a new house, and has not dedicated it... And what man is he that has planted a vineyard, and has not yet eaten of it... And what man is there that has betrothed a wife, and has not taken her...." These are the basic measures for becoming established in the land, and in our prophecy they relate to becoming established in the exile: houses, gardens, and, primarily, marriage and having children. This last measure is described in relative detail, emphasizing how they will become established over several generations, thus teaching them that the exile is not a passing episode, but rather will continue for many years, at least until the third generation.

In verse 5, we find a command of a different kind:

(7) And **seek** the **peace** of the city into **which I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray** to the Lord for it; for in **its peace** shall you have **peace**.

This command presents another, deeper perspective regarding the exile that the people must develop. This directive is of a spiritual, religious nature – prayer on behalf of Bavel and seeking its peace – and it expresses identification with the place.³ Yirmiyahu emphasizes the relationship between the peace of the city and the welfare of the exiles, from which the imperative stems.⁴ Here, for the first time, Yirmiyahu expresses the idea that will accompany exiled Jews for thousands of years – identification with the country in which they are found.

³ Prayer plays a key role in Yirmiyahu's prophecies; this appears to be related to his critique of the sacrificial service in his time.

⁴ "Seeking peace" has a political implication, as we find, for example, in the command in *Devarim* 23:7 regarding Amon and Moav: "You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity." It is therefore possible that Yirmiyahu is alluding here to loyalty in the civil and political sense, in contrast to the tendency of the false prophets to encourage rebellion among the exiles.

Yirmiyahu's words are presented in contrast to the message delivered by the false prophets in Bavel:

(8) For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Let not your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, neither hearken to the dreams which you encourage them to dream. (9) For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the Lord. (10) For thus says the Lord: That after seventy years are accomplished at Bavel I will take heed of you, and perform My good word towards you, in causing you to return to this place. (11) For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, says the Lord, thoughts of **peace**, and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.

The dispute between Yirmiyahu and the false prophets is not just about the length of exile. This is an essential disagreement about its nature and purpose. According to Yirmiyahu, the exile is a necessary condition for salvation. The redemption must pass through a process of rehabilitation and spiritual repair in the exile. In contrast, the prophecy of immediate redemption delivered by the false prophets prevents the exiles from trying to rebuild their lives, and thus cancels the meaning of the exile, rendering it a temporary and meaningless episode. Yirmiyahu argues that in the end, God's thoughts – that is, His long-term plans – are "thoughts of peace," the purpose of which is to give the people a future and hope. This, however, will only arrive at the end of an extended period of seventy years, and it involves prayer for the city of Bavel. Exile is a necessary condition for redemption.

Verses 12-14 parallel the command in verse 7:

(12) Then shall you call upon Me, **and you shall** go and **pray** to Me, and I will hearken to you. (13) And you shall seek Me, and find Me, when **you shall search** for Me with all your heart. (14) And I will allow myself to be found by you, says the Lord, and I will restore you from your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places into which I have driven you, says the Lord; and I will bring you back to **the place from which I caused you to be driven away**.

The verses open with a prayer, which presents the other pole – preserving a connection to the Land of Israel. In addition to prayer, there is also "seeking," but here not of the city, but of God – that He should return them to their land! In verse 7, the focus is on the exile, "the city **into which** I have caused you to be carried away captives," whereas here the focus is Jerusalem: "to the place **from which** I caused you to be driven away."

The description here is similar to the account of the situation in exile in *Devarim* 4:27-31. In both places, the people reach the depths of exile, and precisely from there they return to God. In other words, the condition for repair and redemption is twofold. They must resign themselves to the punishment and understanding that there is a long process that they must pass through. On the other hand, from the exile they must pray and yearn for the Land of

Israel and for God. Only then will it be possible to return to the Land after seventy years.

Over the course of the generations, Yirmiyahu's words to the exiles became one of the foundations of the perception of Jewish survival and adjustment in the exile. R. David Abudraham, who lived in fourteenth century Spain, considers the words of Yirmiyahu to be the basis for the blessing recited for the king that was widespread in Jewish communities:⁵

And after they finish the Torah reading, the prayer leader recites *Kaddish* until the word "*le-eila*"... And it is customary to bless the king and pray to God that He should help him and make him stronger than his enemies, as it is stated in *Yirmiyahu* (29:7): "And seek the peace of the city into which I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace shall you have peace." And the peace of the city is that one should pray to God that the king should defeat his enemies. And we said in the first chapter of *Avoda Zara* (3b): "R. Yehuda says in the name of Shemuel: Why is it written: 'And you make man as the fishes of the sea and as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them' (*Chabakuk* 1:4)?... Just as among fish of the sea, the greater swallow up the smaller ones, so with men, were it not for fear of the government, men would swallow each other alive. This is just what we learned: R. Chanina, the Deputy High Priest, said: Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear thereof, men would swallow each other alive."

However, the complex picture that Yirmiyahu tried to fix in the nation's consciousness in the exile was not always successful. Sometimes, Jews became overly settled in their lands and over-emphasized seeking the peace of exile; occasionally, they strongly opposed their country and preached rebellion. Yirmiyahu's complex message was difficult to absorb.⁶

⁵ Abudraham, *Hilkhot Keri'at Ha-Torah*.

⁶ Note should be taken of the surprising suggestion advanced by R. Reuven Margoliot (*Ha-Mikra Ve-Hamesora* [Jerusalem, 5724], pp. 64-66), which eliminates the great novelty in the words of Yirmiyahu. According to him, the letter *mem* at the end of the word "*etkhem*" should be read as relating also to the following word, "*(mi)shama*": "And seek the peace of the city from which I have caused you to be carried away captives." According to this suggestion, Yirmiyahu is calling for prayer on behalf of Jerusalem, and not for Bavel! R. Margoliot even cites (relatively late) *midrashim* that explain the verse as referring to Jerusalem. A similar proposal was advanced by the Biblical scholar Perles (see M. Weinfeld, "*Yirmiyahu: Ishiyuto vVe-Torato*," section 4, in *Iyyunim be-Sefer Yirmiyahu*), who describes this as a scribal error (haplography – the accidental writing of only one letter or syllable where there should be two similar letters or syllables). However, both of these proposals are groundless and are contradicted by the context of the verse, as I have demonstrated above. R. Margoliot's proposal was accepted by R. E. Samet in his book, *Iyyunim Be-Sefer Tehillim* (Jerusalem 5772), pp. 503-504, where he analyzes psalm 137, which reflects the complex attitude of the exiles in Bavel toward their new country, between adjustment and normalization and forgetfulness, in light of Yirmiyahu's guidelines. As stated, the complex position in the words of Yirmiyahu is evident from the continuation, even without accepting R. Margoliot's interpretation.

In this context, it is interesting to note the beginning of R. Margoliot's words cited above: "Even before I knew how to read a Biblical verse in a proper manner, I was thoroughly familiar

(Translated by David Strauss)

with these words of the prophet ("And seek the peace of the city") from the thousands of declarations made in the elections to the Austrian parliament, to the Galician State Council, and the like, in which the supporters of the ruling regime based their outlook on them. This understanding of the words of the prophet was also the foundation of those who delved more deeply into the substance of the view of the prophet, as this understanding reflects a certain compromise with the exile..."