

**THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU**  
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**Shiur 18B**

**The Prophecy Concerning the Figs: The Difference Between the Exiles  
in Bavel and the People Living in Jerusalem**  
**Yirmiyahu 29**

Further encouragement for the exiles in Bavel is found in verses 16-20 in chapter 29. In these verses, Yirmiyahu contrasts the fate of the exiles who were taken to Bavel in the exile of Yehoyakhin to the fate of the people who remained in Jerusalem:

(16) Thus says the Lord of the king that sits upon the throne of David, and of all the people that dwell in this city, of your brethren that did not go out with you into captivity. (17) Thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, I will send upon them the sword, the famine, and the pestilence, and will make them like vile figs, that cannot be eaten, they are so bad. (18) And I will persecute them with the sword, with the famine, and with the pestilence, and I will make them for a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse, and astonishment, and hissing, and a reproach, among all the nations where I have driven them. (19) Because they have not hearkened to My words, says the Lord, which I sent to them by My servants the prophets, sending them from morning till night, but you would not hear, says the Lord. (20) Hear, therefore, the word of the Lord, all you of the captivity, whom I have sent from Jerusalem to Bavel.

The prophet compares the inhabitants of Jerusalem to vile figs and describes in detail their bitter fate – all this because they did not listen to the prophets. The obvious conclusion with respect to the exiles in Bavel is that they must hearken to God's word in order to avoid a similar fate.

This comparison is based on the prophecy to the exiles in chapter 24. The beginning of chapter 24 is similar to the beginning of chapter 29. The content of the two chapters is also similar, and this includes striking verbal and substantive parallels, and especially the comparison to figs. The section in chapter 29 is apparently a synopsis of the prophecy in chapter 24, as we find in several places in the book of *Yirmiyahu*. Let us then examine the prophecy in chapter 24:

(1) The Lord showed me, and, behold, two baskets of figs were set before the Temple of the Lord, after Nevuchadnetzar king of Bavel had carried away captive Yekhonyahu the son of Yehoyakim the king of Yehuda and the princes of Yehuda with the carpenters and smiths from Jerusalem, and had brought them to Bavel. (2) One basket had very

good figs, like the figs that are first ripe, and the other basket had very poor figs which could not be eaten, they were so poor. (3) Then said the Lord to me: What do you see, Yirmiyahu? And I said, Figs; the good figs, very good; and the bad, very bad, that cannot be eaten, they are so poor. (4) Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so will I favorably regard those that are carried away captive of Yehuda, whom I have sent out of this place into the land of the Kasdim. (6) For I will set My eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them again to this land; and I will build them, and not pull them down, and I will plant them, and not pluck them up. (7) And I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord, and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart. (8) And as the bad figs, which cannot be eaten, they are so evil, surely thus says the Lord, so will I make Tzidkiyahu the king of Yehuda, and his princes, and the remnant of Jerusalem, that remain in this land and those that dwell in the land of Egypt. (9) I will make them a horror for evil to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a proverb, a taunt and curse, in all the places into which I shall drive them. (10) And I will send the sword, the famine, and the pestilence among them, till they are consumed from off the land that I gave to them and to their fathers.

The prophetic vision in chapter 24 is similar to two other prophetic visions that Yirmiyahu saw in his prophecy of consecration – the rod of the almond tree and the boiling pot. In all three prophecies God turns to him with the question: "What do you see, Yirmiyahu." Here too, Yirmiyahu sees a vision from the natural world that symbolizes the fate of the people. However, the visions in the prophecy of consecration, according to their plain meaning, are visions of calamity, whereas the vision in the prophecy of the figs includes both calamity and consolation. This seems to be the reason that figs, which are characterized by different picking times, were chosen for this vision – to teach us that the owner of the fig tree knew to pick his figs, the exiles in Bavel, on time, before they rotted, as opposed to those who remained in the Land of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

There is a parallel between verse 6, "And I will build them, and not pull them down," and chapter 1, verse 10, "To pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant." The point that is stressed here is the possibility of repair that is found among the exiles in Bavel, from whom the people will grow anew. This prophecy, of course, stands in contrast to the mood prevalent among those who remained in the Land of Israel, as was described earlier in the prophecy of Yechezkel. They believed that their brothers who had been exiled from the land "went far away from the Lord,"

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Malbim (ad loc.): "One basket had very good figs.' Figs, if not picked immediately upon ripening, become worm-infested, as *Chazal* said in the *midrash*. Therefore, [Yirmiyahu] likens the exiles of Yekhonya, who were plucked first from *Eretz Yisrael*, to ripe figs that are the first to be picked." It should be noted that Hoshea (whose prophecies are reflected in Yirmiyahu's prophecy in several places) uses first ripe figs as a metaphor for the selection of Israel (9:10): "I saw your fathers as the first ripe fruit in the fig tree at her first season."

and that their fate would not affect them, and they saw themselves as heirs to the land. Yirmiyahu (along with Yechezkel) struggled against this perception, arguing that the truth is just the opposite. It is precisely the exiles, who are likened here to good figs, who will return to the land and inherit it, while those who remained in the land, who are likened to bad figs, will become diminished in numbers and disappear.

Closer examination of chapter 24 teaches that there are several lines of similarity between the vision concerning the figs in Yirmiyahu's prophecy and the dreams of Pharaoh that were interpreted by Yosef:

1. In both visions, good foods are contrasted with bad foods (ears of corn, cows, figs).
2. The vision is described twice – once in objective manner, and a second time from the perspective of the observer.
3. The bad appearance of the food is emphasized by way of the same expression: "And the other basket had very poor figs, which could not be eaten, they were so poor;" "Poor and very ill favored and lean of flesh, such as I never saw in all the land of Egypt for badness."

These parallels join with the series of parallels between Yosef and Yirmiyahu scattered throughout the book. It seems that this broad correspondence might help decode the parallelism in the prophecy concerning the figs.

Yosef interprets Pharaoh's dream and reveals to him that a great calamity is about to fall upon Egypt, in the form of seven years of famine that are symbolized by the lean cows and ears of corn. Yosef's novel idea is that it is possible to deal with the decree by way of storing produce in the seventh year, which is symbolized by the good cows and ears of corn. In this way, Yosef, who was sold as a slave to Egypt, succeeds in saving his family in the years of famine and sustaining them in the exile of Egypt: "For God did send me before you to preserve life."

In the same way, Yirmiyahu, the prophet of destruction and exile, stands before a great calamity that is threatening to befall the people. In this vision, Yirmiyahu reveals that it is precisely in the depths of the calamity that we find a bright spot in the form of the good figs, the exile of Yekhonya, who were "picked" at an earlier stage, before they became ruined, in order to constitute a base for the renewal of the people after the destruction. This parallel is meant, then, to encourage the exiles in Bavel in light of the early exile in Egypt, in the sense of "the actions of the fathers are a sign for their children."

### **The Reaction to Yirmiyahu's Prophecy**

In the second part of the chapter, Yirmiyahu deals with specific prophets who were active in Bavel, and prophesies a bitter future for them. The first prophecy is directed towards two false prophets, Ach'av son of Kolaya and Tzidkiyahu son of Ma'aseya:

(21) Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, of Ach'av, the son of Kolaya, and of Tzidkiyahu, the son of Ma'aseya, who prophesy a lie to you in My name: Behold, I will deliver them into the hand of Nevuchadnetzar king of Bavel; and he shall slay them before your eyes. (22) And of them shall be taken up a curse by all the captivity of Yehuda who are in Bavel, saying: The Lord make you like Tzidkiyahu and like Ach'av, whom the king of Bavel roasted in the fire; (23) because they have committed baseness in Israel, and have committed adultery with their neighbors' wives, and have spoken lying words in My name, which I have not commanded them; but I am He who knows, and I am a witness, says the Lord.

Yirmiyahu accuses the false prophets Ach'av and Tzidkiyahu with a double charge. He opens by accusing them of having prophesied falsely, but at the end he adds another accusation – that they committed adultery with their neighbors' wives. As we saw in our study of chapter 23, there is a close connection between the two charges; in both cases, treachery and lies have become a way of life, and the gap between their lives as prophets and their unrestrained personal lives teaches us about the nature of their prophecies.

A surprising interpretation is found in a *midrash* that describes their actions:<sup>2</sup>

Ach'av the son of Kolaya and Tzidkiyahu the son of Ma'aseya were false prophets and they committed adultery with the wives of their neighbors... What would they do? One of them would approach a woman and say to her: I saw in my prophecy that my colleague will come to you and you will give rise to [i.e., give birth to] a prophet in Israel. (*Pesikta De-Rav Kahana* 24.)

According to the *midrash*, not only did they commit the sin of adultery, but they exploited their "prophetic" power and their standing as prophets in order to satisfy their lusts and to catch innocent women in their nets!

According to the plain sense of Scripture, these were apparently prophets who incited the people to rebel against Bavel as part of their perception of the temporary nature of the exile, and they were therefore punished by the king of Bavel.<sup>3</sup>

In the continuation, we learn of the reactions to Yirmiyahu's letter to Bavel, by way of the words of Shemayahu the Nechemite:

(24) Thus shall you also speak to Shemayahu the Nechemite, saying:  
(25) Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, saying: Because you have sent letters in your name to all the people that are at

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<sup>2</sup> The *gemara* in *Sanhedrin* 93a brings a more developed version of this story.

<sup>3</sup> Attention should also be paid to the play on words connected to the name of Ach'av son of Kolaya: "And of them shall be taken up a **curse** (*kelala*)... whom the king of Bavel **roasted** (*kalam*) in the fire."

Jerusalem, and to Tzefanya the son of Ma'aseya the priest, and to all the priests, saying: (26) The Lord has made you priest in the place of Yehoyada the priest, that there should be officers in the house of the Lord, for every man that is mad, and acts the prophet, that you should put him in the stocks, and in the collar. (27) Now therefore why have you not rebuked Yirmiyahu of Anatot, who acts the prophet to you? (28) Seeing that he sent to us in Bavel, saying: This captivity is long; build houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them. (29) And Tzefanya the priest read this letter in the ears of Yirmiyahu the prophet.

It is clear from here that Yirmiyahu's letter was not well received, but rather stirred up furious responses among the leadership of the exiles in Bavel. The prophets who arose in Bavel, under the leadership of Shemayahu the Nechalamite,<sup>4</sup> came out against him and sent a contrary letter back to Jerusalem attacking Yirmiyahu. The angry Shemayahu demands of Tzefanya, who held an official position, that he arrest Yirmiyahu in keeping with the law governing "every man that is mad, and acts the prophet,"<sup>5</sup> which indicates that he viewed Yirmiyahu as a false prophet.<sup>6</sup>

The words of Shemayahu here express profound shock. In the eyes of Shemayahu and his friends, Yirmiyahu's words concerning settling down in the exile are treason committed against the people and the land. Consider Shemayahu's citation from Yirmiyahu's letter: "This captivity is long; build houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them." The first expression, "This captivity is long," was not stated explicitly by Yirmiyahu, but it is the essence of his prophecy in the eyes of Shemayahu. In the next verse, Shemayahu cites Yirmiyahu's first guideline to the exiles. It is striking that Shemayahu does not relate at all to the meaning and reparative role of the exile in the words of Yirmiyahu, which is a condition for the redemption and for Israel's return to the land.

Tzefanya the priest, to whom the letter is sent, supported Yirmiyahu and read the letter to him. In response, Yirmiyahu sent another letter to the exile, dealing with the fate of Shemayahu:

(31) Then came the word of the Lord to Yirmeyah, saying: Send to all them of the captivity, saying: Thus says the Lord concerning Shemaya

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<sup>4</sup> Some understand this as the name of his home town – Chalam. It also could be a play on words that is meant to mock him, as the Radak writes: "He was called by this name because he would dream dreams for them that they would speedily return to Jerusalem" (see verse 8: "Neither hearken to the dream which you encourage them to dream").

<sup>5</sup> The derogatory term "*meshuga*" (mad) is occasionally attached to prophets as mockery of their practices and as a show of contempt for their prophecies. See, for example, *Hoshea* 9:7: "The prophet is a fool; the man of spirit is mad." See also II *Melakhim* 9:11.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Yirmiyahu had indeed been previously jailed for his prophecies by another priest (*Yirmiyahu* 20:1-2): "Now Pashchur the son of Immer the priest, who was also chief governor in the house of the Lord, heard that Yirmiyahu prophesied these things. Then Paschur struck Yirmeyah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the high gate of Binyamin, which was by the house of the Lord." Later as well Yirmiyahu will be jailed for his prophecies.

the Nechemite: Because Shemaya has prophesied to you, and I sent him not, and he caused you to trust in a lie (32) Therefore thus says the Lord: Behold, I will punish Shemaya the Nechemite, and his posterity; he shall not have a man to dwell among this people; neither shall he behold the good that I will do for My people, says the Lord; because he has uttered rebellion against the Lord.

The chapter closes with Yirmiyahu's reaction to the words of Shemayahu – that neither he nor his descendants would not merit to see the good that will come to Israel. Shemayahu's attempt to prophesy speedy good for Israel and their impending redemption in effect cancels the redemption. Anyone who does not understand that the exile is a condition for the redemption and that it must be accepted with submission will be punished measure for measure and not merit to see the good that God will one day do for His people.

(Translated by David Strauss)