

THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU
"SHALL HE RETURN TO HER AGAIN" – A COLLECTION OF
PROPHECIES OF REPENTANCE (3:1-13)
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I. INTRODUCTION

After the series of prophecies of rebuke in chapter 2, we find in chapter 3 (until 4:2) a unit of prophecies that focuses on repentance. The root *shu"v* (return) is the guide root in this unit, which also has a clear literary framework. In the opening verse, the prophet asks, "Shall he return to her again," and at the end of the unit, God calls out, "If you will return, O Israel, says the Lord, return to Me." The possibility of the people's returning to God after having betrayed Him stands in the center of the unit. The prophecies included in this unit are linked to the prophecies of rebuke in the previous chapter through similar words and images. In this *shiur* we will consider the first part of the chapter (1-13), and in the next *shiur* we will concentrate on Yirmiyahu's prophecy regarding the end of days that appears in the second part.

The two prophecies appearing in the first part of the chapter (1-5, 6-13) reveal striking similarities. First of all, both liken the sins of Yehuda and Israel to acts of harlotry (the root *zn"h* appears three times in each prophecy). While this image is linked to the image of sin as harlotry that we saw already in chapter 2, its uniqueness in the present context lies in the fact that its appearance in the two prophecies is based on the succession of events described in the Torah section dealing with one who takes back his wife after having divorced her (*Devarim* 24:1-4).¹ In order to understand these prophecies, we must examine how that section plays a role in them.

II. "IF A MAN PUT AWAY HIS WIFE" – THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE PARABLE AND ITS MORAL

The first prophecy is divided into two parts. The first part (1) includes a parable and its moral, and the second part (2-5) addresses the sin and punishment of Yehuda. Below we will discuss the connection between the two parts. Our study will focus on the first verse:

- (1) It was said:
If a man put away his wife, and she go from him and become another man's, shall he return to her again?
Shall not that land be greatly polluted?
But you have played the harlot with many lovers; and will you yet return

¹ This phenomenon of using halakhic passages in prophecies is typical of Yirmiyahu, the priest and handler of the Torah, as we saw, for example, in the previous *shiur* regarding the likening of Israel to *teruma*.

again to me? says the Lord.

As noted above, the image of the adulteress, which stood in the center of the previous chapter, also appears in the verses under discussion in chapter 3. The prophecy opens with the word *leimor* (it was said), which is followed by a rhetorical question: "**It was said, If** a man put away his wife... **shall he return** to her again?" There is an interesting similarity between the opening of the prophecy and its rhetorical style and the prophecy of Chaggai (2:11-12):

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Ask now a Torah of the priests, **saying: If** one carries consecrated meat in the skirt of his garment... **does it become holy?**

It stands to reason that we are dealing here with two examples of an ancient formula for asking a halakhic question. In both cases, the prophet uses a *halakha* governing an individual in order to present an argument on the national level relating to the relationship between God and His people: So with Yirmiyahu:

But you have played the harlot with many lovers; and will you yet return again to Me? says the Lord.

And so with Chaggai:

Then Chaggai answered, and said: Such is this people, and such is this nation before me, says the Lord; and such is every work of your hands; and that which they offer there is unclean. (*Chaggai* 2:14)

As stated above, the metaphor used in Yirmiyahu's prophecy is based on the prohibition in *Devarim* 24:1-4. Let us examine the verses in the section dealing with one who takes back his wife after having divorced her:

When a man has taken a wife and married her, and it comes to pass that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some unseemliness in her, then let him write her a bill of divorce and give it in her hand and send her out of his home. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife. And if the latter husband hates her and writes her a bill of divorce and gives it in her hand and sends her out of his house; or if the latter husband, who took her to be his wife, should die, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she is defiled. For that is abomination before the Lord; and you shall not cause the land to be sinful, which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance.

The central topic of this section, according to the plain meaning of the text, is the law governing taking back one's wife after having divorced her.²

² The Sages learned many *halakhot* from this passage, especially the laws of divorce. But according to the plain sense of the text, as stated, divorce is simply the

The first part describes the case: a woman whose husband sent her out of his home (i.e., divorced her), and she married another man, who also divorced her or died. The novelty of this section is the prohibition of the woman to return to her first husband. Such a return is prohibited in harsh language; it is described as an "abomination," which will cause the land to be sinful.

Yirmiyahu cites the words of the Torah with certain changes, and he reaches a conclusion regarding the relations between God and the people of Israel in his time. In order to understand the interpretation of the Torah verses, let us arrange the two texts one opposite the other:

<p>If a man put away his wife,</p>	<p>When a man has taken a wife and married her, and it comes to pass that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some unseemliness in her, then let him write her a bill of divorce, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his home.</p>
<p>And she go from him, and become another man's,</p>	<p>And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife...</p>
<p>Shall he return to her again?</p>	<p>then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she is defiled; for that is abomination before the Lord:</p>
<p>Shall not that land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers; and will you yet return again to Me? says the Lord.</p>	<p>and you shall not cause the land to be sinful, which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance.</p>

Yirmiyahu opens with a description of the divorce – "If a man put away his wife" – but he does not explicitly relate to the background for the divorce. The realistic description, "and send her **out of his home,**" becomes blurred in the prophecy, which turns it into a more general description that is more in accord with the moral: "If a man put away his wife." Instead of "And when she is departed out of his house, she may go," it simply says: "And she go from him." Yirmiyahu summarizes the detailed law in three words, "Shall he return to her again," and he explains in a manner similar to what is found in the Torah: "Shall not that land be greatly polluted." The main novelty lies in the *fortiori* argument proposed by the prophet. Whereas the case in the parable speaks of a permitted marriage, after which the woman is nonetheless forbidden to return to her former husband, an event described as defilement,

background for the new law presented here. Regarding the relationship between the plain meaning of the text and its midrashic exposition concerning this issue, see M. Friedman, "*Ha-Machzir Gerushato Mi-Sheniset Ve-Tum'at Ha-Sota Ve-Ha-Anusa,*" in Shammai Yehuda Friedman (ed.), *Sefer Ha-Zikaron Le-Rabbi Shaul Lieberman* (New York and Jerusalem, 5753).

in the moral the woman acted not in a permitted way, but in a forbidden manner; while she was still married to her husband, "you have played the harlot." This being the case, the prophet's claim includes a much more serious claim than one of defilement. Moreover, we are not dealing here with one additional man, for as described in the verses, the woman played the harlot "with many lovers," and so she may certainly not return to her husband! In this sense, she already polluted and defiled the land with her very harlotry.

The image of the harlot here has a twofold meaning. First, in the ordinary sense, there is a parallel between sin and harlotry, since they both defile God's land. However, there seems to be here an additional meaning, which emerges from reading the moral.

As we have seen, the moral describes the woman as one who has played the harlot and defiled every place in the land – "And you have polluted the land." The later verses underscore the severity of the act through a sharp contrast in the wording of the prophecy between the punishment and the reaction of the people:

- (2) Therefore the showers **have been withheld, and there has been no** latter rain;
And you did have a harlot's forehead, **you did refuse** to be ashamed.

Not only does the woman sin, but even when punishment is meted out, she still has her harlot's forehead and she feels no shame for her behavior. She responds to the withholding of rain with refusal.

III. POLLUTION OF THE LAND IN SCRIPTURE AND IN YIRMIYAHU'S PROPHECY

To conclude the comparison, let us focus on another difference between the Torah passage and Yirmiyahu's prophecy. The root "*chata*" in the Torah passage ("You shall not cause the land to be sinful") is replaced in the prophecy by the root "*chanaf*" ("Shall not the land be greatly polluted"). This root, which is not very common in Scripture, appears in our prophecy four times in verses 1, 2, 15 (and again below 23:11³). *Chanufa* generally appears in Scripture in connection with the land in the sense of sin and defilement. The source of the image is in the Torah passage dealing with a murderer (*Bamidbar* 35:33-34):

So you shall not pollute the land in which you are; **for blood pollutes the land**, and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it. And you shall not defile the land which you shall inhabit, **in which I dwell; for I, the Lord, dwell among the children of Israel.**

³ The verb *chanaf* is found only 11 times in Scripture. *Chanaf* as a noun appears about another 15 times.

The pollution in the verses cited above parallels defilement: "You shall not pollute the land" – "And you shall not defile the land." But it seems that pollution has its own unique hue. "Pollution" describes not only defilement of the land, but also includes a defilement of God, who dwells in that land.

This is how the Ramban understands the matter:

"So you shall not pollute the land" – Since it said at the beginning: "So these things shall be for a statute of judgment to you throughout your generations in all your dwellings" (*Bamidbar* 35:29), indicating that these judgments apply even outside the land [of Israel], it adds a stringency for those residing in the land in honor of the *Shekhina* that dwells there, and warns that we not pollute it and not defile it. **The idea of pollution** is that which is stated in the curses: "You shall carry much grain out into the field, and shall gather but little in; for the locust shall consume it. You shall plant vineyards, and dress them, but shall neither drink of the wine... You shall have olive trees... but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil... All your trees and fruit of your land shall the beetle consume" (*Devarim* 28:38-42).

For all pollution is doing the opposite of what appears to the eyes, and it is a punishment in the land [of Israel] for idol worship, murder, and forbidden sexual relations. As it is stated: "Shall not that land be greatly polluted?" (*Yirmiyahu* 3:1); "The earth is also polluted under its inhabitants" (*Yeshayahu* 24:5); "And you have polluted the land with your harlotries" (*Yirmiyahu* 3:2). And the idea of defilement is that the land will be defiled and the glory of God will not dwell there, since it has innocent blood for which atonement was not achieved through the blood of him who shed it.

As noted by the Ramban, pollution is mentioned in several different places in connection with the three cardinal offenses. In *Yirmiyahu's* prophecy, it appears in connection with forbidden sexual relations and idolatry, and in *Tehilim* 106 it is mentioned also in connection with bloodshed. For the sake of clarification, let us cite the verses in *Tehilim*:

- (37) And they sacrificed their sons and their daughters to idols,
(38) and shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, **and the land was polluted with blood.**
(39) Thus they were defiled with their own works, and went astray (*va-yiznu*) in their doings.
(40) Therefore was the wrath of the Lord kindled against His people, and He abhorred His inheritance.

In these verses as well, the land becomes polluted through bloodshed, which is connected to idolatry. In addition, use is made here of the root *zn"h*. In *Yeshayahu* 24:4-5, this verb appears as part of the description of the undermining of the land as punishment for breaking the covenant:

The earth mourns and fades away, the world languishes and fades

away, the lofty people of the earth languish. **The earth also is polluted under its inhabitants;** because they have transgressed the Torot, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant.

Pollution, then, is unique to the land of Israel, the inheritance of God, and it denotes both the sin and its punishment. There is a connection between violation of the moral law – undermining the foundations of existence in the land – and violation of the physical law – undermining settlement in the land (earthquakes, exile, and perhaps also drought, as is indicated by our prophecy). The book of *Bamidbar* relates exclusively to bloodshed as a sin that results in pollution of the land.⁴ Yirmiyahu expands this to forbidden sexual relations and idolatry.

As suggested by the Ramban, this may be the meaning of the punishment of withholding of rain which appears in our prophecy. The withholding of rain is the physical outcome of the moral pollution of the land.

IV. TO RETURN OR NOT TO RETURN?

What is the purpose of the prophecy? The commentators disagree about this question and propose two opposite answers.

Rashi explains that the parable is intended to illustrate the lovingkindness of God:

"But you have played the harlot with many lovers" – with many lovers, but nevertheless, return again to Me.

Rashi's interpretation is based on the assumption that the words "*ve-shuv elai*" should be read with an exclamation point: "Return to Me!" But the Radak, Abravanel, and other commentators suggest a different reading. The Abravanel writes:

If a man puts away his wife and she becomes another man's, since he sent her away, once she went and became another man's wife, is it fitting that she should return to him again? No, for the earth is truly polluted by this nasty practice. And all the more so in our case where you, O Israel, played the harlot, that is to say, you went by yourself and God did not send you away. You also did not play the harlot with one man, but with many lovers, they being the strange gods that you served. How then can you return to Me, so that I should save you?

In his opinion, the words, "*ve-shuv elai*," should be read in amazement: Is it conceivable that you should return to Me after all this? The halakhic a

⁴ The source of this image of blood that brings harm to the land is found in the story of the first murder in Scripture, the murder of Hevel: "And now cursed are you from the earth, which has opened her mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall not henceforth yield to you her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shall you be on the earth" (*Bereishit* 4:11-12).

fortiori argument teaches that the answer is no. It is important to note that according to the Abravanel and those who understand the text as he does, these verses are not a prophecy of repentance, but rather words of strong rebuke. Later in the *shiur*, we will return to this fundamental dilemma in understanding the prophecy.

In verses 4-5, the prophecy closes with a dialogue between Israel and the prophet:

- (4) Will you not from this time cry to me: My father, You are the guide of my youth?
- (5) Will He bear a grudge forever? Will He keep it to the end? Behold, you have spoken and done evil things and have had your way.

In their distress, apparently due to the previously-mentioned drought, the people turn to God with words of supplication and recall the devotion of their youth: "The guide of my youth."⁵ The people, who are confident in the devotion of their youth, are convinced that God's anger is only temporary: "Will He bear a grudge forever?" The prophet, however, answers in harsh language. This belief allows the people to continue sinning without fear, based on their confidence that forgiveness will surely come. As the *mishna* states (*Yoma* 8:9): "One who says: I will sin, and repent; I will sin, and repent – he is not given an opportunity to repent." Perhaps, for this reason, the prophecy should be understood as it was understood by the Abravanel, who explains that it denies the people the possibility of repentance.

V. FROM "FAITHLESS ISRAEL" TO "TREACHEROUS YEHUDA"

The second part of the prophecy begins by noting the time:

The Lord said to me in the days of Yoshiyahu the king.

Despite the notation of the prophecy's timing, already at the beginning, God directs the prophet to the distant past, to the days of the kingdom of Israel. The two kingdoms are described here as sisters, whose actions and fates are similar. He first describes the difficult and intensive sins of idol worship of the kingdom of Israel, "Upon **every** high mountain and under **every** green tree," and that despite the fact that He expected her to repent – "And I said, After she has done **all** these things, she will return to Me" – His expectation was in vain: "But she did not return."

But the actions of "faithless Israel" are brought merely as a backdrop for the clarification of the severity of the actions of the kingdom of "treacherous Yehuda." The severity of Yehuda's actions lies in the fact that even though she saw the sin and punishment of her sister kingdom, which

⁵ This designation for a husband is found in the context of betrayal. Thus, in *Mishlei* 2:16-17: "To deliver you from a strange woman... who forsakes the guide (*aluf*) of her youth"; and in *Mikha* 7:5: "Put not confidence in a guide (*aluf*); keep the doors of your mouth from her that lies in your bosom."

experienced the Assyrian exile, she continued along her path of sin and harlotry and failed to realize the possibility of repentance. Seeing (*re'iya*) the fate of the kingdom of Israel did not give rise to fear (*yir'a*) in her heart, as it should have.

The sharp conclusion appears in verse 11:

Faithless Israel has proved herself more just than treacherous Yehuda.

The severity of Yehuda's sin stems from the fact that she should have learned from the precedent that she saw before her eyes. This severity is also reflected in the designations attached to the two kingdoms: Israel is called "faithless," whereas Yehuda is named "treacherous."

This prophecy is closely linked to the previous one. It too is based on the image of a harlot and on the passage dealing with divorce in the book of *Devarim*. The sin and punishment of the kingdom of Israel is likened respectively to harlotry and divorce by way of "a bill of divorce," and the kingdom of Israel is compared to the kingdom of Yehuda who played the harlot like her sister and polluted the land, as was stated in the previous prophecy (verse 1).

It seems, however, that each prophecy focuses on a different aspect of the passage. The first prophecy focuses on the divorced woman's return to her husband, in accordance with what is stated in *Devarim*: "For that is abomination before the Lord; and you shall not cause the land to be sinful, which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance" (*Devarim* 24:4). (It should be noted that in this verse as well, causing the land to be sinful should be understood in its plain sense – idolatry with the stones and trees of the land. And from here also the punishment – exile from the land). Furthermore, the first prophecy describes a one-sided act on the part of the people, who stray under God, while in the second prophecy, there are two stages: First the harlotry of the people, followed by God's call to them to repent, which is rejected, and only afterwards a description of the divorce initiated by God. Here too, it is worthwhile comparing the wording of the Torah passage to that of the prophecy. There (*Devarim* 24:1) it says:

When a man has taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favor in his eyes, because he has found some unseemliness in her; then let him write her a bill of divorce, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his home.

Here, it seems that being sent away from the house of God means exile, and it appears that the prophet interpreted in a strict manner the phrase, "some unseemliness," which serves as the grounds for divorce in the passage in *Devarim*. We are dealing with a husband who discovered that his wife had been unfaithful to him.⁶ In other words, in terms of the moral, this prophecy

⁶ In fact, this is the plain meaning of the word *erva* in Scripture. Attention should also be paid to the play on words: "That she **find** no favor in his eyes, because he has

states that God acted towards Israel in a manner that went beyond the letter of the law. Rather than sending her away after finding an unseemliness in her, He gave her another opportunity to return to him, and only after she failed to return did He send her from His home.

VI. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PROPHECY

As stated, at the beginning of the prophecy it is noted that that prophecy was delivered during the days of King Yoshiyahu. What is this meaning of this notation of the time of the prophecy, which is not at all common in the first half of the book? The Radak explains the historical context as follows:

"In the days of Yoshiyahu the king." Why does it say this? Surely we know that he prophesied during the days of Yoshiyahu. Rather because he also prophesied in the days of Yehoyakim and in the days of Tzidkiyahu, it says that this prophecy was delivered in the days of Yoshiyahu, **and before Yoshiyahu and Yehuda repented.** For Yoshiyahu wiped out idolatry from the land, and here he says: "And committed adultery with stones and with wood" (3:9). If so, the prophecy was delivered before the repentance. What is then: "And yet for this her treacherous sister Yehuda has not turned to Me... but in pretense" (3:10), that it seemed like they repented, but they did so in pretense. **It is possible** that with the rebuke of the prophet Yirmiyahu that he prophesied against them, some of them may have repented in the open, but not in secret, and this is what it says: "in pretense." **One can also explain that this prophecy was delivered after the repentance:** Even though it says about Yoshiyahu that "he turned to the Lord with all his heart, and all his soul" (II *Melakhim* 23:25) – he repented with all his heart, but the people of Yehuda repented under compulsion out of fear of the king. This is what it says: "She has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense."

According to the first option proposed by Radak, the prophecy was delivered before the process of Yoshiyahu's repair and repentance, in which case Yirmiyahu's prophecy was responded to in a positive manner. However, according to the second option, this prophecy was delivered after the reforms of Yoshiyahu, and it is in fact a sharp critique of that process. The broad and comprehensive reforms that Yoshiyahu undertook in the wake of finding the Torah scroll is described at length and in detail in the book of *Melakhim*, but here the prophet presents a mirror image of the royal reforms, and teaches that this was an external process that failed to change the deeper currents in the nation. Their repentance is seen here as artificial lip-service. A sharp, picturesque depiction of the gap between inside and outside, and between the nation and their king, is found in *Midrash Eikha Rabba* (ed. Buber, 1:18):

found some unseemliness in her." This is the way the term was understood by Bet Shammai in the *mishna* (*Gittin* 9:10): "Bet Shammai say: A man must not divorce his wife unless he finds some unseemliness [i.e., some act of infidelity] in her, as it is stated: 'Because he has found some unseemliness in her.'"

"The Lord is righteous; for I have rebelled against His word" (*Eikha* 1:18). Who uttered this verse? Yoshiyahu uttered it... But Yoshiyahu did not know that his entire generation was worshipping idols. What were the mockers of the generation doing? Half an image on this door, and half an image on that door, and he sent two Torah scholars to destroy the images in their houses. And they went in and found nothing. When they left, they told them to close the gates after them, and they went out and closed the gates after them, and the images were there on the inside...

Another parallel between the two prophecies is found in the closing verse. The second prophecy ends as follows:

(12) Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: Return you faithless Israel, says the Lord, and I will not frown upon you; for I am merciful, says the Lord, and **I will not bear a grudge forever.**

(13) Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God, and have scattered your ways to the strangers under every green tree, and you have not obeyed My voice, says the Lord.

The section opens with a call to repentance – "Return you faithless Israel" – and with the declaration that God will not bear a grudge forever for the sin. These words correspond to the words of Yehuda at the end of the previous prophecy: "**Will He bear a grudge forever? Will He keep it to the end?**" But it seems that it is precisely this assumption regarding God's not holding a grudge forever that provided the motivation to sin, in the sense of "I will sin and I will repent." Perhaps, therefore, repentance is mentioned in the previous prophecy in a question – "Can you return to Me?" – whereas here God says that in fact He will not bear a grudge forever, "for I am merciful." Nevertheless, there is a condition. The condition for repair is knowing and acknowledging the sin: "Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God." This is in complete contravention to the denial of sin against which the prophet warned earlier.⁷

In conclusion, even though fundamentally, in terms of the depth of the sin and its effect (defilement and pollution of the land) as well as from a legal-halakhic perspective, there is no room for repentance, nevertheless God in the end proposes the path of repentance, which overcomes all of these things. This teaches that repentance overcomes the Torah itself! This is what R. Yochanan learns from our prophecy:

⁷ The words "And I will not frown (*lo apil pana*) upon you" are reminiscent of God's words to Kayin: "Why are you angry and why are you crestfallen (*ve-lama naflu panekha*)?" That passage is the first presentation of repentance in Scripture: "If you do well, shall you not be accepted?" Mercy (*chesed*) is reflected in several places in the acceptance of repentance: "Merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in love (*chesed*) and truth" (*Shemot* 34:6); "The Lord is merciful and gracious, longsuffering **and abundant in love.** He will not always chide, **neither will He keep His anger for ever**" (*Tehilim* 103:8-9) – in the context of repentance.

R. Yochanan said: Great is repentance, for it overrides a prohibition of the Torah, as it is stated: "It was said, If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man's, shall he return to her again? Shall not that land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers."⁸

Perhaps this lesson is also the meaning of the vague interpretation of the first prophecy that we discussed above. Since the possibility of repentance can lead to sin, the prophet emphasizes that it is not self-evident. On the other hand, immediately thereafter it is emphasized in the second prophecy that if the people acknowledge their sin, then repentance can override any prohibition in the Torah.

(Translated by David Strauss)

⁸ The opposite interpretation, which corresponds to the explanation of the Abravanel and the Radak, follows from *Sifrei Devarim (Ha'azinu, 306)*: "You will in the future say to Him: Master of the universe: You have already written: 'It was said, If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man's, shall he return to her again?' He will say to her: I wrote 'a man.' Surely it was already stated: 'For I am God, and not a man' (*Hoshea* 11:9). Another explanation: Are you sent away from me, O house of Israel? But surely it is already stated: 'Thus says the Lord, Where is the bill of your mother's divorce, with which I have sent her away? Or which of My creditors is it to whom I have sold you' (*Yeshayahu* 50:1)."