

# MATAN AL HAPEREK

## A Renewed Meeting with Tanach

### Yeshayahu Perakim 44-45

#### Perek 44

In these two chapters God is depicted as the God of the whole world and its inhabitants. The heart of chapter 44 (9-20) expresses the futility of idols through a long, mocking description of their worshippers and their makers; while at the peak of chapter 45 God requests that all the nations leave their gods, and worship God together, to pray and bow down to Him. These pesukim were the basis for the prayer of *Aleynu L'Shabeach*, which was originally composed for the Yom Kippur prayer; and expresses the lofty aspiration that all the nations should worship God in the end of days.

- 1 The mocking descriptions of the idol worshippers and their makers can be divided into two: 12-13: The creation of the statue by the maker out of raw materials (iron and wood). 14-19: The preparation of the materials (wood). In what way does the prophet make fun of the idol worshippers in each stage? Note the contrasts between the descriptions of the sculptor who creates the statue in pesukim 12-13, and the descriptions of God, the creator of the world (44:2; 40: 22, 28-29). Who is the craftsman, and what relationship exists between man and his gods?
- 2 Yeshayahu compares the different parts of the tree (16, 17, 19). What does this comparison teach us about the role an idol played in the idol-worshipper's life?
- 3 In pesukim 24-28 yet another advantage of God over the idols and their worshippers is emphasized. This advantage is described in both a negative (25) and a positive (26-28) way; most likely hinting towards the magicians of Babylonia, who prophesied its success and triumph before it fell in the time of Cyrus, as the prophet had said. How does this illustrate the profound difference between the worship of God and the worshipping of idols? See the following commentary of **Ramban** in his additions to Sefer Hamitzvot (Aseh 8):

For we were commanded to fully devote our heart to God, as it says: *'You must be wholehearted with the Lord your God'*. The meaning of this commandment

is that we should direct our heart to worship God alone, and that we should believe that He, alone, created all that exists, and that He knows the truth of our entire future, and should we inquire about the future, we would request it of Him, His prophets and His followers... We should not inquire about the future through the stars in the heavens, or rely that what they tell will come true... However, it says 'Everything is in the hands of heaven', for He changes the star system according to His will, *'Who annul the omens of diviners, and make fools of the augurs'* (Yeshayahu 44:25). And we must believe that the future events come to us according to how close we have come in worshipping Him; as was promised *'Do not learn to go the way of the nations, and do not be dismayed by portents in the sky; let the nations be dismayed by them!'* (Yirmiyahu 10:2). And they said in the last chapter of Pesachim: 'How do we know that you must not consult astrologers [lit. Chaldeans]? Because it is said: *'Thou shalt be whole-hearted with the Lord thy God'*. And the Chaldeans are the remainders of the pagan nations.'

## Perek 45

In the prophecies of this chapter the prophet refers to Cyrus the king of Persia, who conquered the vast Babylonian empire, and who gave permission to Babylonian exiles to ascend and resettle in their land. Cyrus, is titled here *'His anointed one'* (in original Hebrew משיח), and he was chosen by God to complete His will, through the redemption of Israel and by spreading the belief in God amongst the nations (1-7). In the next section the prophet rebukes those who are not willing to accept the path of the redemption which will occur through Cyrus (9-13). In the conclusion of the chapter the prophet addresses all the nations and calls them to solely worship God (18-24).

4 "Thus said the Lord to Cyrus, His anointed one..." (1)

a) In the first section of the chapter (1-7) God speaks directly to Cyrus, and calls him *'anointed one'* (משיח), since he was appointed by God to fulfill His will in His victories. Follow the various objectives of Cyrus's victory, which all open with the word *'So'* (למען). How are these objectives arranged, and is there a development within them?

b) The phrase 'I am the Lord', which refers to the knowledge of God as a result of His actions, is also repeated a few times in this paragraph (3, 5, 6, 7). Discuss the development in the nature of the knowledge of God, which occurs through the numerous appearances of this phrase.

- 5 Pesukim 9-13 are a prophetic rebuke towards those who refuse to recognize Cyrus's role. What is the religious problem with the perception of these people according to the prophet (9-11); and what do you think is the reason that they refuse to accept it? Why is the creation of the world mentioned in God's reply? Note the personal pronouns אני/אני which appear three times in pesukim 12-13.

## Appendix

### Cyrus's religious perceptions

The victories of Cyrus, king of Persia, are present in the background of our chapters and various others; however, only chapters 44-45 mention his name explicitly. Cyrus began his path as the ruler of Anshen, a small principality in Eylam. In the year 553 B.C. Cyrus rebelled against Astigas, king of Media, and captured him; and in the year 540 B.C. Cyrus went out to combat the vast Babylonian empire, and one year later Babylonia surrendered before him without a battle. Thus, Cyrus became ruler of the most powerful empire of his time, beginning the Persian era. Cyrus showed significant religious tolerance towards all the nations under his rule, including the people of Israel. In his first year as king Cyrus publicized a statement allowing the exiles of Judah to return to their land, and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, as is related in the beginning of the book of Ezra. His deeds and proclamations were recorded by his men in an ancient inscription, discovered in the form of a cylinder in 1879 and is known as the "Cyrus cylinder":

'I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, powerful king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters [of the earth],... beloved by Bel and Nabu, whose kingship they desire for their hearts' and pleasures... Marduk, the great lord, was well pleased with my deeds, and to me, Cyrus, the king who worshipped him, and to Cambysis, my son, the offspring of my loins, and to all my troops he graciously gave his blessing... I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akad whom Nabonid had brought into Babylon to the anger of the lord of the gods, unharmed, in their former chapels, the places which make them happy. May all the gods whom I have placed within their sanctuaries and resettled in their sacred cities, address a daily prayer in my favor before Bel and Nabu, that my days may be long, and may they recommend me to him...'

In Cyrus's desire to make peace with all the Gods, his idolatrous conception is emphasized. And it would seem that this is the background for Ezra's statement at the beginning of his book:

*'Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord God of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has charged me with building Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Anyone of you of all His people- may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem that is in Judah and build the House of the Lord God of Israel, the God that is in Jerusalem.'*

Based on this we can now understand the words of Yeshayahu in our perek:

*'Thus said the Lord to Cyrus, His anointed one- whose right hand He has grasped, treading down nations before him, ungirding the loins of kings, opening doors before him and letting no gate stay shut: I will march before you and level the hills that loom up... So that you may know that it is I the Lord, the God of Israel who call you by name. For the sake of My servant Jacob, Israel My chosen one, I call you by name, I hail you by title, though you have not known Me.'*

In other words, the prophet says that it was Hashem who summoned Cyrus in order to complete his plan to redeem Israel, but Cyrus himself is unaware of this as he is trapped within his idolatrous conception which recognizes a plurality of divine beings. Therefore, Yeshayahu later emphasizes the uniqueness of Hashem:

*'I am the Lord and there is none else; beside Me, there is no god. I engird you, though you have not known Me, so that they may know, from east to west, that there is none but Me. I am the Lord and there is none else but Me. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe- I the Lord do all these things.'*



The Cyrus cylinder, on display in the British Museum in London • photo: Mike Peel

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