

MATAN AL HAPEREK

A Renewed Meeting with Tanach

Yirmiyahu Perakim 49-50

Perek 49

Perek 49 includes prophecies to five nations. The perek opens with a prophecy about the destruction of Ammon, Moab's northern neighbor, who fought with the tribes of Israel who were in the Transjordan area (1-6). Afterwards, there is a prophecy about Edom which is south of the Transjordan area (7-22). The third prophecy deals with Damascus in the North, which was the capital of Aram in the past (23-27). Afterwards there is a prophecy about Keidar and the nomadic tribes that lived in the Syrian-Arabian desert and were conquered by Nevuchadnezzar twelve years before the destruction of the first Temple (28-33). The final prophecy in our perek deals with the distant kingdom of Elam, which was east of the Tigris River, and whose capital city was Susa (Shushan) (34-39).

- 1 "Of the children of Ammon. Thus says the Lord: Has Israel no sons? Has he no heir?" (1) – the language of children is woven throughout the prophecy about Ammon. Follow these references and see the different contexts found in the descriptions of the sins and punishments. What is the central sin which the prophecy about Ammon focuses on? Examine the seriousness of the sin and the unique wording which the prophet chooses, in light of the family relationships between Ammon, the children of Lot and Israel.
- 2 "But afterward I will bring back the captivity of the children of Ammon" (2) – very few of the prophecies about the gentiles end with a prophecy of their redemption and return to their land (Egypt – 46:26, Moab 48:47, Elam 49:39). In this way, the text tightens the connection between the prophecies of doom and consolation about Israel and the prophecies of doom and consolation about the gentiles. There was a fascinating debate about this during the time of the Tannaim (the

Rabbis of the Mishna). Read the following Mishna and pay attention to the connection between the prophecies about the gentiles and the prophecies about Israel, as we see in the words of Rabban Gamliel, and to the further connection made by Rabbi Yehoshua:

Massechet Yadayim 4:4 - On that day Judah, an Ammonite proselyte, came and stood before them in the House of Study. He said to them: have I the right to enter into the assembly? Rabban Gamliel said to him: You are forbidden. R. Yehoshua said to him: You are permitted. Rabban Gamliel said to him: The scriptural verse says, *“an Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord: even to the tenth generation,”* etc. R. Yehoshua said to him: but are the Ammonites and Moabites still in their own territory? Sancheriv, the king of Assyria, has long since come up and mingled all the nations, as it is said: *“In that I have removed the bounds of the peoples, and have robbed their treasures, and have brought down as one mighty the inhabitants.”* Rabban Gamliel said to him: the scriptural verse says, *“But afterward I will bring back the captivity of the children of Ammon”*, so that they have already returned. R. Yehoshua said to him: the scriptural verse says, *I will turn the captivity of my people Israel and Judah* yet they have not already returned. So they permitted him to enter the assembly.

Perek 50

The portion of the book which deals with prophecies of the gentiles closes with a series of long prophecies of doom about Babylonia in perakim 50-51. The prophecy of doom which will come to Babylonia has woven within it prophecies of consolation and redemption for Israel. The destruction is divine retribution and revenge for the destruction of Israel and the Temple, and will bring redemption to Israel and allow it to return to its land.

3 “For out of the north there comes up a nation against her, which shall make her land desolate”

a) The perek opens by giving us the direction from which the destruction by Babylonia will come. For whom is this reference meant?

b) A similar directional sign appears in Yirmiyahu’s first prophecy of doom – in his inaugural prophecy (1:3-15) - and appears many times in the course of the book. Pay attention as well to the significant similarity between the

description of the doom of Babylonia in pasuk 41 in our perek and the prophecy of doom of Israel in 6:22. What is the meaning of this similarity in relationship with the prophecy of doom for Babylonia?

- 4 Among the descriptions of the destruction of Babylonia we find prophecies of redemption for Israel which are full of references to shepherding (6-8, 17-19).

a) Pesukim 6-7 describe the situation of Israel which caused its destruction and annihilation. Compare the two sides of the parable in these pesukim. Who is responsible for their situation? Pay attention to the contrast between the words of the adversaries (7) and the word of God in the beginning of the book (2:3). On what do you think this contrast is based, considering the pesukim in our perek?

Pay attention to how the prophet calls out to the people in pasuk 8, and to the change in the role and direction of the leadership (In Tanach, the Atudim (he-goats) are the leaders of the flock.)

b) The image of the sheep is continued in pesukim 17-19. Who is blamed for the loss of Israel here, and who leads Israel to the pasture?

Appendix

Parables of Sheep in the Prophecies of Yirmiyahu

In the prophecies of many of the prophets we find parables from the lives of sheep and descriptions of the flock and pasture. Even so, none of the prophets use the sheep and shepherd imagery as often or in as much as detail as Yirmiyahu, in all of his words and prophecies, his prayers to God and in pouring out his rage on the gentile nations...Yirmiyahu is completely imbued with the spirit of the shepherd and his lifestyle, and at every opportunity they “burst” forth from him. This phenomenon, which appears from time to time, sometimes in isolated words and sometimes in detailed descriptions, could only occur with a prophet who for years led the life of a shepherd.

We see clearly the war between the shepherds – between the despoiled shepherds and the shepherds of the “*peaceable pastures*” (25:37) –in another pasuk which appears twice in Yirmiyahu: the first time in the prophecy about the destruction of Edom and the “*inhabitants of Yemen*” (49:20) “*Therefore bear the counsel of the Lord, that He has taken against Edom; and His purposes,*

that He has purposed against the inhabitants of Yemen: surely the least of the flock shall drag them away, surely their habitation shall be appalled at them.” The second time it appears is in the prophecy of destruction of Babylonia in 50:45 *“Therefore bear the counsel of the Lord, that He has taken against Babylon, and His purposes, that He has purposed against the land of the Chaldeans: surely the least of the flock shall drag them away, surely their habitation shall be appalled at them.”* This pasuk which Yirmiyahu said in two prophecies about two different nations, also comes from his experience, what he has seen and heard. There is a factual description of what seems to be the ways of the *“chief of the flock”* who are victorious, sending their young – this time not to water, but rather to ... battle the *“chiefs of the flock”* of their opponents who have been defeated, to destroy (either by overgrazing or by destructive behavior) their pasture in which they graze. Here as well, it is difficult to separate between the parable and the moral which it teaches, which are unified in the soul of the prophet. *“The least of the flock”* of the opponent – the boys of the shepherds – will be commanded to hurt the chiefs of the flock of the defeated, to carry and abuse them.

The shepherd and his flock suffer not only at the hands of enemies on two legs. No less hurtful are the natural predators – the animals of prey that come out of their hiding places to get a “banquet” from the flock of the innocent shepherd. In the terrible prophecy about Edom he describes the enemy, *“Behold, he shall come up like a lion from the thickets of the Jordan against the strong habitation; for I will suddenly make him run away from it, and whoso is chosen, him will I appoint over it; for who is like Me? and who will appoint Me a time? and who is that shepherd that will stand before Me?”* (49:19). We see before us the frightening picture of a lion emerging into the shepherd’s pasture (which until now seemed to be peaceful) and causing destruction in the flock. This fear he prophesies also for Babylonia in its time (50:44). For his own plundered nation the prophet says, *“Israel is a scattered sheep, the lions have driven him away; first the king of Assyria has devoured him, and last this Nevuchadnezzar king of Babylonia has broken his bones.”* (50:17) This description is so life-like and the perspective of the shepherd who has either seen this occur or lives in constant fear of it is so clear in these words.

Another phenomenon in the life of the flock is seen in the prophecies of Yirmiyahu – these are the “atudim” (he-goats) which are the leaders of the flock, and who leave the pen first, leading the flock. Perek 50 begins with a prophecy of consolation to Israel and continues with a prophecy of destruction for Babylonia. Babylonia, which collected all the nations and exiled them to a large “pen” in their land – will also have to drink from the cup of wrath and will fall. When

that happens the nation which it has conquered and exiled will leave: *“Cut off the sower from Babylon, and him that handles the sickle in the time of harvest; for fear of the oppressing sword they shall turn everyone to his people, and they shall flee everyone to his own land.”* (50:16) Yirmiyahu prods his people to be quick and be the first to leave the land of the exile which is collapsing. This is how he opens the prophecy of destruction for Babylonia – as if he wants to make sure that Israel escapes from Babylonia before the sword breaks loose and chaos takes over the gentile nations. And so, the parable which he has lived with daily, that of the shepherd, breaks forth from his heart – for the atudim (he-goats) are the first to be pushed to leave the pen to the pasture, and he calls for his nation to act like the atudim: *“Flee out of the midst of Babylon, and go forth out of the land of the Chaldeans, and be as the he-goats before the flocks.”* (50:8)

Not only do we see the images from the life of the sheep in the exodus from Babylonia. The prophet also sees in the return of the nation to their land, the flock returning to their pasture (just as he sees the destruction of the nation as a result of the flock of Israel getting lost from their pasture and reaching foreign hills). The most lyrical prophecies of consolation are full of descriptions of the Nation of Israel as “lost sheep” who returned to their beloved pasture and shepherd, *“And I will bring Israel back to his pasture, and he shall feed on Carmel and Bashan, and his soul shall be satisfied upon the hills of Ephraim and in Gilead.”* (50:19) How touching is this picture of the Nation of Israel grazing again on its rich hills as sheep in their pasture - but Yirmiyahu speaks not only in parable. His eyes see not only his nation grazing in the hills, but their own actual sheep and cattle, the creatures which are an inseparable part of his life experience and that of the people.

(Free translation from Nogah HaReuveini in *Or Chadash al Sefer Yirmiyahu*)



(Wikipedia / Phillip Capper)

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02-5944555 • טל': perek.matan@gmail.com

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מתן מרחיב

מכון תורני לנשים ע"ש שרה בת יצחק יעקב רעננערט
The Sadie Renner Women's Institute for Torah Studies

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