

MATAN AL HAPEREK

A Renewed Meeting with Tanach

Yeshayahu Perakim 19-20

Perek 19

This prophecy, which describes Egypt's replacement of polytheistic worship with worship of Israel's God, completes Yeshayahu's vision for the End of Days. The prophecy is comprised of two sections: the first section (1-15) describes the stages of destruction which will be brought upon Egypt, and the second section (16-25) discusses the gradual process of rehabilitation which will bring Egypt, and eventually Assyria, to a devoted commitment to God. This process is paralleled to Israel's exodus from Egypt, beginning with enslavement, the harsh rule of a despot, and plagues which bring about recognition and worship of God. The surprising twist of this perek is that it is Egypt itself who undergoes this transformative process.

Beginning from the time of Avraham, Egypt symbolized the spiritual, moral, and religious antithesis of the Jewish people. The exodus from Egypt was not simply a freedom from slavery, but represented redemption from everything Egypt symbolized. Many commandments in the Torah are presented as contrasts to the immoral behavior typical of Egypt. Yeshayahu's prophecy transforms Israel's exodus from Egypt into the paradigm of redemption which Egypt itself will one day merit.

- 1 Note the three stages of destruction that will befall Egypt [a) 1-4; b) 5-10; c) 11-15]. Pay attention to the symbols of Egyptian pride which are weakened in each section.

- 2 The damage sustained by the Nile (stage 2) resembles the first plague brought upon Egypt: the plague of blood (Shemot 7:14-25). How are these two situations similar and what is the significance of this parallel?
- 3 Egyptian wisdom (stage 3) was renowned in the ancient world and was a great source of national pride (See I Melachim 5:10). However, we are familiar with another account of this wisdom's failure from the story of Pharaoh's dream in Breishit 41. Who succeeded in combatting this problem and why (Breishit 41:16)? What can we learn from this about the failure of Egyptian wisdom in our perek?
- 4 The rehabilitation process is comprised of four stages, each beginning with the words "on that day." Discuss the gradual development represented by each stage.
- 5 Review pesukim 19-22. From where does the recognition and worship of God emerge? Note the striking similarities between the description of Egypt's salvation in this perek and God's words to Moshe regarding the salvation of Israel at the burning bush (Shemot 3:7-9).
- 6 Pesukim 24-25 describe the relationship between Israel and the empires which surround it. Note the similarities between this description and God's words to Avraham at the start of his journey (Breishit 12:2-3). According to these pesukim, what is the ultimate mission of the Jewish people?

Perek 20

In this short and enigmatic prophecy, Yeshayahu is instructed to do something that will illustrate the impending destruction of Egypt and Ethiopia, a destruction that will free Israel from the alliances it made with these countries. This perek serves as a closing to the two previous prophecies which detail the fates of Ethiopia (18) and Egypt (19).

- 7 "Go, and loose the sackcloth from your loins, and remove your shoe from your foot." This surprising instruction became part of a broader debate regarding the nature of symbolic acts, such as this one, common throughout the prophetic books of Tanach. Below, we have brought excerpts from Rambam's Guide for the Perplexed (section 2, chapter 41) and Abarbanel's commentary which represent the two opposing sides of this debate. What points are raised by each commentator?

Rambam: The ordinary reader believes that the acts, journeys, questions, and answers of the prophets really took place, and were perceived by the senses, and did not merely form part of a prophetic vision...God forbid to assume that God would make his prophets appear an object of ridicule and sport in the eyes of the ignorant, and order them to perform foolish acts...Again, when it is said, “*As my servant Isaiah went naked and barefoot*” (20:3) the prophet did so in a prophetic vision. Weak-minded persons believe that the prophet relates here what he was commanded to do, and what he actually did... (Trans. by M. Friedlander)

Abarbanel: Is there room for us to deny the simple understanding of these stories and say that they [took place] in a prophetic vision and [are] a work of the imagination...Behold we have seen the prophets perform acts so that man will inquire “*What is this?*” and they are answered “*Thus said God,*” because things seen with one’s eyes leave a greater impression than words.

Appendix

In his prophecy regarding Egypt, Yeshayahu envisions Egypt’s worship of God and the building of an altar and a monument to facilitate this worship. An interesting tradition regarding the fulfillment of this prophecy appears in the writings of Yosef ben Matityahu (Josephus).

But then the son of Onias the high priest, who was of the same name with his father, and who fled to king Ptolemaeus...When this Onias saw that Judaea was oppressed by the Macedonians and their kings, out of a desire to purchase to himself a memorial and eternal fame he resolved to send to king Ptolemaeus and queen Cleopatra, to ask leave of them that he might build a temple in Egypt like to that at Jerusalem, and might ordain Levites and priests out of their own stock. The chief reason why he was desirous so to do, was, that he relied upon the prophet Isaiah, who lived above six hundred years before, and foretold that there certainly was to be a temple built to Almighty God in Egypt by a man that was a Jew... So Onias took the place, and built a temple, and an altar to God, like indeed to that in Jerusalem, but smaller and poorer. [*Antiquities of the Jews, Book 13, Chapter 3, Trans. by William Whiston*]

There is another correlation between Josephus' story and our prophecy. Yeshayahu calls one of the Egyptian cities that will swear to God "the city of destruction" [עיר ההרס]. Already in the Talmud, Rav Yosef translates "city of destruction" as the city of Bet Shemesh (*beres=cheres* which is mentioned in a few places in Tanach as a reference to the sun=*shemesh*). Josephus recounts that Onias builds his temple in the Egyptian city Heliopolis, which is Greek for "Bet Shemesh"—"city of the sun."

A slightly different tradition of Onias' altar appears in the Talmud Yerushalmi. It is important to mention that the Sages differed in their perception of Onias' temple regarding whether it was built to facilitate worship of God or other foreign gods:

For forty years Shimon the Righteous served as the High Priest and in his last year he declared to the nation "This year, I will die." They said to him: Who should be appointed after you? He said to them: "My son Nechunyon (Onias) is before you." They went and appointed Nechunyon, but his brother Shimon became jealous of him. So he went and dressed himself in clothing of leather and in a belt and said to them: "See what [my brother] vowed to his beloved. He said to her: "When I serve as the high priest, I will don [my brother's] leather clothing and belt." They inquired regarding these matters and found them to be false...He [Shimon] fled to Alexandria and built an altar and called out this pasuk: "*In that day shall there be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt*" [Talmud Yerushalmi, Tractate Yomah 6:3].

