

SEFER DANIEL
By Rav Yaakov Medan

Shiur #06: Chapter 4 - The First Dream

Thus far, we have discussed the actual phenomenon of Nevukhadnetzar's dream and the word of God that it contains. Let us now turn our attention to the meaning of the dream. It is described by Daniel as follows:

"You, o king, saw – behold – a mighty image. This image was imposing and of extreme brightness; it stood before you, and its appearance was terrible. The head of this image was of fine gold, its front and arms were of silver, its belly and thighs of brass, its legs of iron, and its feet party of iron and party of clay. And you watched until a stone was cut without hands, and it struck the image on its feet which were of iron and clay, and broke them. Then the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver and the gold all broke into pieces and were like the chaff of the summer threshing floors, and the wind carried them way, and no place was found for them. And the stone which had struck the image became a great mountain, and it filled the entire earth. This was the dream, and we shall state its meaning before the king."

Daniel then goes on to present the following interpretation:

"You are the king, king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given kingdom, power, strength and glory; and wherever mortals dwell, the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky – He has given them into your hand and has made you ruler over all of them; you are the head of gold. And after you there shall arise another kingdom, inferior to yours, and then a third kingdom, of brass, which will reign over the entire earth. And the fourth kingdom will be as strong as iron, for iron breaks to pieces and subdues all things, and like iron that shatters, so shall it break and shatter all of these. And as for your seeing the feet and the toes, partly of potters' clay and partly of iron – it shall be a divided kingdom, with some of the strength of iron in it, as you saw – iron mixed with miry clay. And like the toes of the feet which were partly iron and partly mire, part of the kingdom will be strong, and part will be broken. For as you saw iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of man, but they will not cleave to one another, just as iron cannot be mixed with clay. And in the days of these things, the God of heaven will raise up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, nor will this kingdom be left to another people; it shall break and consume all of these kingdoms, and it shall remain forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and it broke the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold. The great God has made it known to the king what will happen in the future, and the dream is certain, and its meaning is sure."

The elements most easily understood here are that Nevukhadnetzar and the Babylonian kingdom are the head of gold, and the Kingdom of God (and His people, Israel) are the stone that is cut out; this is the final Kingdom. In between, there are three other kingdoms: one is represented by the silver front and arms; the second is represented by the belly and thighs of brass; the third is represented by the legs of iron and its mixture with clay. Together with the kingdom of Babylon, these are the four kingdoms which subjugate *Am Yisrael* until the time of the redemption.

The conventional interpretation of this vision is set forth in the *midrash*:

Daniel saw these four kingdoms, and was afraid... What did Daniel see? When Nevukhadnetzar had his dream and Daniel came to explain its meaning to him, he said, "You are the head of gold," "the front and arms of silver" – this is the kingdom of Babylon; and "after you there shall arise another kingdom," "its belly and thighs of brass" – this is the kingdom of Media, "and then a third kingdom, of brass, which will reign over the entire earth," its legs of iron – this is the kingdom of Greece. "And the fourth kingdom will be as strong as iron," "its feet party of iron and party of clay" – this is Edom. Why is [Edom] compared to iron and clay?... Just as iron is strong, so this evil kingdom is strong, but it is also compared to clay, because in the future God will break it, like clay... And he saw the king *Mashiach*, as it is written, "And you watched until a stone was cut..." Reish Lakish said: This is the king *Mashiach*. "And it struck the image on its feet" – [meaning,] all the kingdoms which are embodied in this image. (*Tanchuma, Teruma 6*)

According to this interpretation, the second kingdom (silver) represents that of the Persians and Medes,^[1] the third kingdom (brass) is Greece, and the fourth kingdom, depicted as a mixture of iron and clay, is the "kingdom of Edom" – i.e., Rome.

What is the connection between Rome, which is in Europe, and Edom, whose homeland is Mount Se'ir? The etymological connection between them is based on an exchange of the letters "*resh*" and "*daled*." "Rome" in Hebrew is "*Roma*," spelled "*resh, vav, mem, alef*;" "*Edom*" is spelled "*alef, daled, vav, mem*." Owing to the similarity in the appearance of the letters "*resh*" and "*daled*," they are exchanged in several places in Tanakh.^[2] The example most relevant to our discussion is:

At that time, Retzin, king of Aram, restored Eilat to Aram and drove the men of Yehuda from Eilat, and the Aramim [read (*keri*), "Adomim"] came to Eilat and dwelled there, to this day. (*Melakhim II 16:6*)^[3]

Just as Edom is exchanged for Aram, so Edom is exchanged with Rome.^[4]

As mentioned, almost all the commentators agree that the "silver kingdom" symbolizes the Persians and Medes (hence the two arms, according to R. Sa'adia Gaon), while the kingdom of brass represents Alexander the Great and the Greek empire which flourished after him. Ibn Ezra includes Rome within the third kingdom,

apparently owing to the cultural and religious similarities between Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome.^[5] To his view, the fourth kingdom is that of Yishmael – that is, Islam. The commentary attributed to R. Sa'adia Gaon^[6] asserts that the divided fourth kingdom is comprised of both Rome and Yishmael. Rashi, however, like the *midrash*, ignores Yishma'el-Islam and identifies the fourth kingdom as Rome.

Reish Lakish, the source for the identification of the fourth kingdom as Edom, could have imagined no alternative explanation. After all, the Islamic conquest began centuries after his death. Similarly, Rashi could ignore the kingdom of Yishma'el. He lived under the kingdom of Edom, if we assume that all of Christianity is to be identified with Edom-Rome (which accepted Christianity during the time of Constantine at the end of the first century of the fourth Jewish millennium, paralleling the third generation of Amoraim).^[7] R. Sa'adia Gaon and Ibn Ezra, however, could not ignore Yishma'el, nor could Abarbanel, who lived in Spain for most of his life. Hence, we conclude that the explanations of the various *Rishonim* reflect the history of their times.

This being so, what can we say in our generation, after the many developments in Christianity, culminating in the horror of Nazi Germany (which is not identical with Christianity), as well as the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, and the rise of the United States? What has become of the idea of the "four kingdoms"? *Chazal* reiterate the existence of four kingdoms in the context of the second verse in the Torah,^[8] the Covenant of the Parts,^[9] the unclean animals in *Vayikra* 11,^[10] and the wild beasts in *Yirmiyahu* 5.^[11] Hundreds of years have passed and we have survived more than four kingdoms – and still *Mashiach* has not come!

The Maharal, at the beginning of his *Ner Mitzva* as well as in other places, explains the concept of the four kingdoms as tied specifically with the number four – meaning that the concept is valid regardless of the exact historical number.^[12] Maharal regards the number four as representing division (as in the "four winds of the heavens" in *Zekharia* 6). This concept of division stands in contradiction to God's Kingship, which is expressed in unity. Hence, Maharal argues, the exact identification of the four individual kingdoms need not necessarily be historically and numerically accurate; several empires may be counted together as the final "kingdom" – especially in light of its composite nature (see chapter 7).

R. Kook viewed the First World War as the awakening of the power of *Mashiach*.^[13] He was correct: towards the end of the war, Britain issued the Balfour Declaration, paving the way for a Jewish national home in *Eretz Yisrael*. Three years later, this aspiration was recognized by the nations at the San Remo Conference. This recognition of the establishment of a national home for *Am Yisrael* came with the disintegration of the four Great Powers: The Prussian Empire, the Russian Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire.^[14] The Maharal certainly did not have this specific historical event in mind, but he must have meant something of this sort.

Indeed, aside from the fact that *Chazal* invoked the concept of the “four kingdoms” in other contexts as well, as noted above, the connection between punishment and the number four appears in many places. We find God's “four severe judgments” in *Yechezkel* 14; the four families which God will visit upon Israel at the time of the Destruction, as related in *Yirmiyahu* 15; and many others. All of this lends support to the explanation proposed by Maharal.

The difficulties raised by the historical approaches are clear. Beyond the question of the kingdoms which arose after that of Edom and Yishma'el, it is difficult to conceive of Edom and Yishma'el as being two branches of the same kingdom. The difficulties inherent in the theoretical, non-historical approach likewise speak for themselves, arising as they do from the very fact that the historical dimension is ignored.

We shall therefore attempt to propose a different approach to the question. Perhaps we need not necessarily understand Daniel's explanation as a view of history stretching until the coming of *Mashiach*, may he come speedily in our days. Even Yaakov, in his words to his sons on his deathbed, speaking of the “end of days,” appears to have foreseen their history only until the Sanctuary in Shilo and not beyond that:

“The scepter shall not depart from Yehuda, nor the ruler's staff from between his legs, until the coming of Shilo, and the obedience of the people shall be his.”
(*Bereishit* 49:10)

From this verse it appears that Yaakov did not foresee God's choice of Jerusalem.^[15] Perhaps this is what *Chazal* meant when they said that “the end was hidden from him.” Daniel, too, did not necessarily see all the generations of human history over thousands of years.

To the best of our understanding, we may say that the silver front and arms do indeed represent the Persians and the Medes (two arms, as noted). The belly and thighs of brass symbolize Alexander the Great. The feet of iron and clay are the Diadochi, who were not the continuation of the Macedonian kingdom, but rather a different kingdom ruled by Alexander's successors. This explains the emphasis in the dream on the division between them – between the house of Ptolemy, which ruled over Egypt, and the house of the Seleucids, who ruled over Syria and the surrounding region, and the negative relations between them, in the form of the impossible mix of iron and clay. We shall discuss the critical significance of this rift between the house of Ptolemy and the house of the Seleucids as a single but divided kingdom in the final chapter of this series. To our humble view, Daniel's vision never went beyond the Greek Empire and what came in its wake; he never envisioned the Roman Empire, and certainly not the Islamic conquest. We thus propose to explain all the calculations of the end of history and the redemption in a way that is different from the accepted approach.

Why did Daniel see all the way to the divided kingdom of Greece? This reality was to come about only long, long after his time. And if he already saw that far, why not a little further, until the Roman Empire?

The essence of Daniel's vision, as we understand it, pertains to God's Kingship that would come after the kingdom of Ptolemies and the Seleucids – the kingdom of the Chashmonaim. In it, and through the miracles which God would perform in the Temple, Daniel perceived the manifestation of God's eternal Sovereignty. Indeed, the Hasmonean dynasty was the first Israelite monarchy to be established after the loss of Jewish independence with the death of Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda, at the end of the First Temple Period. The miracles which occurred for the Chashmonaim in the Temple (the miracle of Chanuka) were a sign of the Divine Presence resting upon *Am Yisrael* in anticipation of the redemption. Perhaps, had we been worthy, it could indeed have been God's will for the redemption of Israel to be realized and maintained forever. However, free choice was stronger than this option, and the dynasty of the Chashmonaim deviated from the path of God, from the path of righteousness and justice, after the death of the righteous sons of Matityahu. Daniel's visions were therefore left in wait for a far-off redemption, the same redemption we are still awaiting – may it come soon – since a Divine promise for the good is never retracted.

The same fate waited many of the visions of our prophets, which have not yet been fulfilled:

And at one moment, I may speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; but if it does evil in My sight, not obeying My voice, then I repent of the good which I had spoken of, to benefit it. (*Yirmiyahu* 18:9-10)

The dream interpreted by Daniel should be viewed in comparison to the visions of two of the prophets. One is Yirmiyahu, who prophesized the end of the Babylonian kingdom already in the year that Nevukhadnetzar rose to power. He also foretold the beginning of Israel's redemption from the Babylonian exile, after the fall of the Babylonian empire:

And it shall be, at the end of seventy years, that I shall visit upon the king of Babylon and upon that nation, says God, their iniquity, and upon the land of the Chaldeans, and I shall make it an eternal desolation. (*Ibid.* 25:12)

Therefore, so says the Lord of Hosts, God of Israel: Behold I shall punish the king of Babylon and his land, as I have punished the king of Assyria. And I will bring Israel back to their pasture, and they shall feed on Carmel and Bashan, and their soul shall be satisfied upon Mount Efraim and the Gilad. (*ibid.* 50:18-19)

The difference between Yirmiyahu and Daniel is that Yirmiyahu spoke about the beginning of the redemption, about the return to Tzion and the redemption of the land, which would commence seventy years after the rise to power of the Chaldeans – as

indeed happened with Cyrus's declaration and the return to Tzion. Daniel, however, spoke about the revival of Israelite sovereignty, the liberation of the nation from its subjugation and exile. This is a longer process. According to the calculation of *Chazal*, it took an additional two hundred years; according the accepted historical calculation, it took approximately an additional 370 years. There were similarly considerable gaps in time between the redemption and settling of the land in the days of Yehoshua and the establishment of the great monarchy in the days of David. A great discrepancy between the two levels of sovereignty exists in our generation, as well.

The other prophet who provides an interesting comparison to Daniel is Chaggai. He belonged to a later period, prophecizing at the beginning of the period of the return to Tzion in the second year of Darius (Daryavesh), with the beginning of the construction of the Second Temple. Chaggai prophesized as follows:

For so says the Lord of Hosts: In just a little while, I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land. And I will shake all the nations, and the choicest of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of Hosts. (*Chaggai* 2:6-7)

Rashi and Radak explain that the reference here is to the miracles in the days of the Chashmonaim. But whereas Chaggai uttered this prophecy after the construction on the Temple had already begun, Daniel voiced the same message of hope while still in exile.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] In truth, we deviate here slightly from the text of this particular *midrash* in order to take into account all the other *midrashim* and the commentators on the Book of Daniel. The Midrash Tanchuma cited views both the gold and the silver as representing the kingdom of Babylon, while the brass represents the Medes as well as the Greeks, the latter also having iron legs. This is a most surprising depiction, and it is possible that a scribal error led to this version. In any event, all the commentators agree that the silver represents the Persians and Medes, the brass symbolizes Greece, and all the iron corresponds to the fourth kingdom. See Rashi on 2:39,44 and Malbim on these verses. Abarbanel (*ma'ayan* 6, *tamar* 1) provides a similar explanation to that of R. Sa'adia Gaon, which we will examine below, asserting that the fourth kingdom comprises both Rome and Yishmael, and the Malbim (verse 41) echoes this view. Abarbanel has difficulty accepting an interpretation that binds these two nations into a single "kingdom." However, even in the dream itself we see that the fourth kingdom is partly iron and partly clay; according to the above commentators, the allusion here is to Edom and Yishmael, or Christianity and Islam.

[2] Some further examples: "De'u'el" (*Bamidbar* 1:14) is "Re'u'el" (ibid. 2:14); "Kittim and Dodanim," listed as descendants of Yavan in *Bereishit* 10:4, are the same "Kittim and Rodanim" who appear in the parallel genealogical list in *Divrei Ha-yamim I* 1:7; the "seven thin (*rakot*) and miserable cows" (*Bereishit* 41:27) are the same "cows of miserable appearance and of thin flesh (*dakot ha-basar*)" mentioned several verses previously (ibid. 41:4).

[3] Cf. *Divrei Ha-yamim II* 20:2, and compare *Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 18:12 and *Shmuel II* 8:13.

[4] Indeed, R. Sa'adia Gaon and Ibn Ezra call the fourth kingdom "Aram," a linguistic merging of "Edom" and "Romi."

[5] The same assertion is cited by Abarbanel in the name of the Christian sages (*ma'ayan* 6, *tamar* 2), and he rejects it. However, their argument takes a different direction from that adopted by Ibn Ezra: they, of course, claim that the fifth kingdom is their own religion.

[6] Wherever we have mentioned R. Sa'adia Gaon here, we refer to the commentary attributed to him. Many sages and scholars have questioned this attribution, however. R. Prof. Daniel Sperber cites their opinions and tends towards their conclusions in his book *Minhagei Yisrael I* (Jerusalem, 5753), pp. 149-153.

[7] This identification rests, inter alia, on the fact that the Pope resides in the Vatican, which is in Rome.

[8] Once again in the name of Reish Lakish: "Reish ben Lakish interpreted this verse to refer to the successive exiles: 'And the earth was without form (*tohu*)' – this refers to the Babylonian exile, as it is written, 'I have seen the land and behold, it is without form;' 'and void' (*vohu*) – this refers to exile under the Medes, [based on the verse], 'They hurried (*yavhilu*) to bring Haman;' 'and darkness' – this is the exile of Greece, which darkened the eyes of Israel with their decrees... 'upon the face of the deep' – this is the exile of the evil kingdom, which is fathomless in its depth" (*Bereishit Rabba 2*).

[9] "And He said to him [Avraham], 'Take for Me a three-year old heifer...' – He showed him four kingdoms which were destined to subjugate his descendants, as it is written... 'And behold, a horror of great darkness fell upon him.' 'Horror' – this refers to the kingdom of Babylon; 'darkness' – this is the kingdom of the Medes; 'great' – the Greek empire; 'fell' – this is a fourth kingdom, which must be Rome. Some opinions identify the kingdoms in a different order: 'fell' as referring to Babylon, as it is written, 'Babylon has fallen;' 'great' referring to Media, as it is written, 'King Ahashverosh made great (*gidel*);' 'darkness' – the Greeks, who darkened the eyes of Israel with fasting; 'horror' – the fourth kingdom, as it is written, 'of surpassing power and fearfulness and strength.'" (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Yitro, parsha 9*)

[10] *Vayikra Rabba 13*.

[11] *Yalkut Shimoni, Vayikra, remez 536*. See also Abarbanel (*ma'ayan 2*), who brings together further *midrashim* and exegetical explorations of sets of four in *Tanakh*, corresponding to the four kingdoms. Some of these include the four rivers proceeding from the Garden of Eden; the four kings – Kedarla'omer and his companions – against whom Avraham waged war; the four creatures from Yechezkel's vision of the Divine Chariot; the four horns of the craftsmen in the prophecy of Zekharia, as well as in his vision of the four horses and four chariots.

[12] Maharal is preceded in this concept by Abarbanel, *ibid*.

[13] At the beginning of his article on "The War," *Orot* (Jerusalem, 5753), p. 13.

[14] See the historical calculations in chapter 9.

[15] He therefore divided the chosen place between Yosef, his chosen son, and Ephraim, his own son's chosen son.