

THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU
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SHIUR #16B:

**THE ATTEMPTED REBELLION AGAINST BABYLON AND YIRMIYAHU'S
PROPHECY CONCERNING THE BONDS**

(1) In the beginning of the reign of Yehoyakim the son of Yoshiyahu, came this word to Yirmiyahu from the Lord, saying: (2) Thus says the Lord to me: Make bonds and bars for yourself and put them upon your neck, and send them to the king of Edom, and to the king of Moav, and the king of the children of Amon, and the king of Tzor, and the king of Tzidon, by the hands of the messengers which come to Jerusalem to Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda.

Years have passed since the rise of Nevuchadnetzar; Babylonia has become an empire that controls the Mesopotamian region and Yehuda, and the rest of the countries in the region are subject to its authority. After Tzidkiyahu's rise to power in Yehuda, Egypt begins to lift its head, the countries in the region try to organize themselves once again against the Babylonian empire, and their representatives gather in Jerusalem for this purpose.¹ This international conference serves as the backdrop for Yirmiyahu's prophecies in the chapter to the kings of the nations, to Tzidkiyahu, and to his people. These prophecies are accompanied by symbolic means of illustration – bonds and bars.²

¹ This is what the Radak writes in his commentary: "It seems that the kings mentioned here sent to Tzidkiyahu that he should agree with them, so that all of them should rebel against the king of Babylonia. Therefore, God commanded Yirmeyahu to tell these representatives and Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda that they should all bring their necks under the yoke of the king of Babylonia."

² The prophecy opens with a notation of the time relating to the kingdom of Yehoyakim, "In the beginning of the reign of Yehoyakim," but the historical background which it addresses is the period of Tzidkiyahu, and it also appeals directly to Tzidkiyahu. How, then, are we to understand the prophecy's heading? The Radak explains that this prophecy was delivered in the days of Yehoyakim, but it refers to the future: "This prophecy was stated to Yirmeyahu in the first year of the reign of Yehoyakim, and God said to him that when Tzidkiyahu will rule after the kingdoms of Yehoyakim and Yehoyakhin, he should make bonds and bars, and send them to the various kings by way of the messengers that will come to Jerusalem to Tzidkiyahu... And he should command them to say to the kings their masters who will send them to Tzidkiyahu, and they should say to them all the things mentioned in the section, and Yirmeyahu should also say to them: 'I spoke also to Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda according to all these words....' And *Chazal* said that when the king of Babylonia crowned him as king, he gave him rule over these kings. And the fact that this prophecy was told to him at the beginning of the reign of Yehoyakim and the prophecy was not yet for another eleven years, this was so that Yehoyakim should know that Nevuchadnetzer would rule in the future, and that Yehoyakim should not put his trust in the king of Egypt who crowned him." Ibn Ezra

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first and longest prophecy in the chapter (4-11) is addressed to the kings of the nations; the second prophecy (12-15) is directed to Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda; and the third prophecy (16-22) is pointed to the priest and the people. All three prophecies have a similar structure: They open with a positive command – to submit to the king of Babylonia – and then they warn against listening to the words of the false prophets who prophesy just the opposite.

(4) Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Thus shall you say to your masters: I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are upon the ground, by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and have given it to whom it seemed proper in My eyes. (5) And now have I given all these lands in the hand of Nevuchadnetzar the king of Babylonia, **My servant**; and the beasts of the field have I given him also **to serve him**. (7) And all the nations **shall serve him**, and his son, and his son's son, until the time of his own land come also; and then many nations and great kings shall **make him a slave (ve-avdu)**. (8) And it shall come to pass, that the nations and kingdoms which **will not serve**

proposes an original interpretation in his commentary to *Daniel* 1:1. According to him, after the death of Yoshiyahu, the nations thought that Tzidkiyahu would rule in his place: "For it was known among all the nations that Tzidkiyahu was crowned as king. And the proof is the verse in *Yirmeyahu*: 'In the beginning of the reign of Yehoyakim son of Yoshiyahu king of Yehuda.' God tells Yirmeyahu to make bonds and send them to the kings of Edom, Moav, Amon, and Tzor in the hands of the messengers who come to Jerusalem to Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda, because those kings heard that Yoshiyahu was killed and they thought that Tzidkiyahu, who was crowned when he was twenty-one years old, would rule in his place." Ibn Ezra also deals with what is stated later in the section, where Yirmeyahu prophesies about Tzidkiyahu himself after he became king. In his opinion, this prophecy was indeed delivered at a later date: "And something is left in the section that requires explanation, namely: 'I spoke also to Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda.' Here Yirmeyahu relates to the matter of the bars to Tzidkiyahu when he becomes king after the exile of Yehoyakim, and says to him: 'Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylonia.'" Ibn Ezra brings a third resolution of this difficulty in the name of R. Yona Ibn Janach, a leading grammarian of the eleventh century, in chapter 28 of *Sefer Ha-Rikma*: "And there was a great commentator in Spain, and he explained [various] books with precision, and he explained that 'Tzidkiyahu' is written in place of 'Yehoyakim.'" Ibn Ezra himself sharply rejects this explanation: "... And similarly many words, about two hundred, and all of them will be carried away by the wind. For how is it possible that a person should say one word and mean a different one? Anyone who speaks like that is considered crazy. I have already explained all of them, and it would be better for him to say, 'I do not know,' rather than alter the words of the living God." A similar argument is sounded in modern biblical research, according to which the heading is in error and "Yehoyakim" was erroneously written in place of "Tzidkiyahu," under the influence of the heading of the previous chapter: "In the beginning of the reign of Yehoyakim son of Yoshiyahu king of Yehuda." (It should be noted that Ibn Janach himself never argued that we are dealing with a mistake, but rather with a kind of metonymy for internal reasons.) We will conclude with another resolution proposed by M. Bula in his *Da'at Mikra* commentary to *Yirmeyahu*. According to him, "it seems that the prophecy was delivered twice in similar circumstances. In the beginning of the reign of Yehoyakim when the nations in the region wished to unite against Nevuchadnetzar following his victory over Pharaoh Nekho at Karkemish... In the beginning of the reign of Tzidkiyahu, when he too wanted to make a pact with those same nations against Nevuchadnetzar. Apparently, the prophecy was written twice: Once with the name of Yehoyakim, and once with the name of Tzidkiyahu. But only once did it enter into the book of *Yirmeyahu* and the heading relating to the days of Yehoyakim remained in its place."

this Nevuchadnetzar the king of Babylonia, and that will not put their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylonia, that nation will I punish, says the Lord, with the sword, and with the famine, and with the pestilence, until I have consumed them by his hand.

(9) Therefore, hearken not to your prophets, nor to your diviners, nor to your dreamers, nor to your enchanters, nor to your sorcerers, who speak to you, saying: **You shall not serve** the king of Babylonia; (10) for they prophesy a lie to you, to remove you far from your land, and that I should drive you out, and you should perish. (11) But the nations that bring their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylonian, and **serve him**, those will I let remain still in their own land, says the Lord; **and they shall till (ve-avada) it**, and dwell in it.

As stated, this prophecy is divided into two parts: First, Yirmiyahu presents the Divine plan, according to which all the nations must serve the king of Babylonia (5-8), and then he contends with the opposite claim put forward by the pagan sorcerers. In this exceptional prophecy, addressed directly to the kings of the nations, Yirmiyahu adapts the style of his prophecy to the world and language of the pagan kings to whom he turns. Thus, at the beginning of the first part (5), he presents God as He who fashioned the world and everything in it, and at the beginning of the second section (9) he contends with the words of the pagan magicians: the diviners, the dreamers, the enchanters, and the like.

The root *ayin-bet-dalet*, "serve, slave, work," appears seven times in the prophecy and weaves together its main ideas. Let us trace its various appearances and contexts – in relation to a command, to reward, and to punishment. It first relates to a Divine command – the beasts of the field (6) and all the nations (7) will **serve** the Babylonian king, and anyone who fails to serve him will be punished with destruction (8). At the same time, the nation that serves him will merit continuing to **work** their own land (11), and therefore one should not listen to the lies of the prophets and magicians who say not to **serve** him (9). The principle of measure for measure that was mentioned in chapter 25 is repeated here as well: Just as many nations served Nevuchadnetzar, so when the time comes many nations shall make him a **slave** (7).

The root *ayin-bet-dalet* appears one more time: Nevuchadnetzar is called "**My servant**" (*avdi*). At the same time, however, it is stated about him that in the end many nations will make him a slave. What is the meaning of this duality in Nevuchadnetzar's standing? Why is he punished for a mission that he is meant to carry out? It seems that this should be understood in light of Yeshayahu's words concerning the king of Ashur. The king of Ashur was also selected to carry out God's plan, but since he did not act out of a sense of mission, but simply in an attempt to glorify his own name, he has no real right to do so, and he will therefore be punished for his actions.

It is worth noting the wording with which the prophecy opens: (5) I have made the earth... by My great power, and by My outstretched arm, and have given it to whom it seemed proper in My eyes." This wording is repeated

almost word for word in Rashi's famous remark at the beginning of his commentary to the Torah:

R. Yitzchak said: The Torah should have commenced with the verse: "This month shall be unto you the first of the months" (*Shemot* 12:1), which is the first commandment given to Israel. What is the reason, then, that it commences with the account of the Creation? Because: "He declared to His people the strength of His works in order that He might give them the heritage of the nations" (*Tehilim* 91:6). For should the peoples of the world say to Israel: "You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations of Canaan," Israel may reply to them: **"All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed is He; He created it and gave it to whom He pleased. When He willed He gave it to them, and when He willed He took it from them and gave it to us."**

Rashi's premise is that the Torah is a book of commandments, and therefore it is not clear why the Torah includes the stories from the account of the Creation until "This month shall be unto you the first of the months." Rashi's answer is that the historical narrative comes to teach a fundamental principle of faith: "He declared to His people the strength of His works" in order to establish His people's right to their land. As stated, Rashi formulates this principle in light of Yirmiyahu's prophecy. The significance of this connection was pointed out by R. M. Breuer in his article, "*Lashon Ha-Zahav shel Rashi*".³

Yirmiyahu's intention is to warn those kings to serve the king of Babylonia, and since they might think they have the power to overcome him, he warns them: King Nevuchadnetzar does not conquer countries by his own power. Rather, God puts them in his hands, and therefore anyone who rebels against Nevuchadnetzer rebels against God who gave him rule over the world. For this reason, Yirmiyahu opens with the creation of the world. God made the earth... and He who made the earth also gives it to whomever He pleases. This leads to the conclusion that God gave these lands to Nevuchadnetzar. This is absolute proof for the words of Rashi. For the opening words of Yirmiyahu are similar to the opening words of the Torah. He too prefaces his words with the creation of the world, but this opening does not come to teach us halakhic minutiae or religious principles, but rather to show us the secret of history. Since God made the earth, He gives it to whom it seems proper in his eyes.

In the second prophecy, verses 12-15, Yirmiyahu addresses Tzidkiyahu, the king of Israel:

(12) I spoke also to Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda according to all these words, saying: Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylonia, and serve him and his people, and live. (13) Why will you die, you and

³ In his book, *Pirkei Bereishit I* (Alon-Shevut 5758), p. 25.

your people, by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence, as the Lord has spoken against the nation that will not serve the king of Babylonia? (14) Therefore, hearken not to the words of the prophets that speak to you, saying: You shall not serve the king of Babylonia; for they prophesy a lie to you. (15) For I have not sent them, says the Lord, but they prophesy a lie in My name; that I might drive you out, and that you might perish, you, and the prophets that prophesy to you.

Apart from the lack of an introduction, which, as stated, was directed at the kings of the nations, the message to Tzidkiyahu is similar to the message to the kings in content and in style. Attention should be paid, however, to a small difference regarding the prophets. Concerning the prophets of the nations, it says only: "For they prophesy a lie to you." This refers to the pagan prophets, who work together with the magicians and diviners. Here, however, it is explicitly stated: "For I have not sent them, says the Lord, but they prophesy a lie in My name." This is not only false prophecy, but false prophecy in the name of God. Israel's false prophets also pretend to speak on behalf of God. This leads to the second difference. In the previous prophecy, nothing is said about a punishment for the prophets, whereas here it is explicitly stated that these prophecies will lead to the punishment of both Israel and their prophets: "And that you might perish, you, and the prophets that prophesy to you," for false prophecy in the name of God is a grave sin in itself.

The third prophecy (15-22) is directed to the priests and the people:

(16) Also I spoke to the priests and to all this people, saying: Thus says the Lord: Harken not to the words of your prophets that prophesy to you, saying: Behold, the vessels of the Lord's house shall now shortly be brought back from Babylonia, for they prophesy a lie to you. (17) Harken not to them; serve the king of Babylonia, and live; why should this city be laid waste? (18) But if they are prophets, and if the word of the Lord be with them, let them now make intercession to the Lord of hosts that the vessels which are left in the house of the Lord, and in the house of the king of Yehuda, and at Jerusalem, go not to Babylonia. (19) For thus says the Lord of hosts concerning the pillars, and concerning the sea, and concerning the bases, and concerning the residue of the vessels that remain in this city (20) which Nevuchadnetzar king of Babylonia did not take, when he carried away Yekhonya the son of Yehoyakim king of Yehuda captive from Jerusalem to Babylonia, and all the nobles of Yehuda and Jerusalem; (21) for thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning the vessels that remain in the house of the Lord, and in the house of the king of Yehuda and of Jerusalem; (22) that they shall be carried to Babylonia, and there shall they be until the day that I take heed of them, says the Lord; then will I bring them up and restore them to this place.

Here the order is reversed; Yirmiyahu opens with a rejection of the false prophecy, and then brings the true prophecy. The subject of the prophecy is also different from the subject of the two previous prophecies that

were directed at the kings. Here, Yirmiyahu rails against the false prophecies concerning the return of the Temple vessels. There is no point talking here about submitting to the king of Babylonia, for here he speaks to the people and the priests who are not involved in political moves. The priests and the people are focused mainly on the fate of the Temple. The Temple vessels that were taken at the time of Yekhonya's exile represent the honor of the Temple that was desecrated by the king of Babylonia, and they therefore await the fulfillment of the words of the prophets concerning the speedy restoration of those vessels to their rightful place, together with the return of Yekhonya's exile. In his usual manner, however, Yirmiyahu shatters this hope related to the Temple; the Temple vessels will remain in Babylonia for an extended period of time. Instead of thinking about the past, they should concentrate on the dangers of the future. The prophets must intercede with God and pray for the fate of the vessels remaining in Jerusalem, for the current decree relates to the taking of the remaining vessels to Babylonia.

Yirmiyahu's words contain a twofold critique. The first is against the false prophets, who prophesy about unconditional peace and do not pray or hope for a change in the situation or for internal reform. Not only will such a position not change the past, but it could make matters worse in the future. Second, criticism is apparently also being voiced here against the priests and the people who are preoccupied with the Temple vessels as part of their erroneous perception of the Temple as the house of God that cannot be destroyed, and their mistaking form for content – the idea that the Temple and its vessels are the essential matter, and not the sanctity that depends on human actions.

In light of Yirmiyahu's prophecies in chapter 27, we can understand the significance of the announcement of Nevuchadnetzar's rise in chapter 25. Yirmiyahu's goal is not only to prove that he was right in the past, in the twenty-three years of his prophecies, but to deliver a message about the future. Until the rise of the king of Babylonia, the goal was to bring about the mending of Israel's ways so that they not become subjugated to the people from the north. However, now that this period has come to a close, Yirmiyahu's prophetic message changes. Now he preaches to accept the yoke of the king of Babylonia, and warns of the greater dangers that may fall upon the people should they try to turn back the clock and undo the decree. Now the people must know how to humbly accept their sentence and serve the king of Babylon, God's messenger, with the spirit of accepting God's decree. At the same time, they must keep in mind the future redemption and await their salvation.

(Translated by David Strauss)