

MATAN AL HAPEREK

A Renewed Meeting with Tanach

Yirmiyahu Perakim 1-2

Perek 1

This first perek serves as an introduction to the book of Yirmiyahu. It begins by introducing the prophet's lineage and origins (1-3). Yirmiyahu lived in a small priestly village east of Yerushalayim named Anatot. He began prophesying in the thirteenth year of Yoshiyahu's reign (627 BCE). This year marked a significant turning point in the ancient world: the Assyrian empire started to unravel and the Babylonian Empire began its rise to power. This historic development directly impacts the kingdom of Yehuda. After years of servitude to the Assyrians, autonomous rule for Yehuda and its neighbors once again becomes possible. Yoshiyahu takes advantage of this development and widens the northern boundaries of his kingdom in regions previously part of an Assyrian province. However, a power-struggle breaks out between the new Babylonian empire and Egypt. Yehuda is dragged into the struggle and is ultimately conquered and exiled by the Babylonian king Nevuchadnezzar. Yirmiyahu's prophecies attempt to arouse the nation to repentance before this exile arrives.

After this brief introduction, we move to Yirmiyahu's inaugural prophecy which includes an accurate portrayal of his overall goals and intent as a prophet (4-10). This first vision reveals the unique nature of Yirmiyahu's prophetic career, one filled with bitter confrontation with the uncooperative nation and unrelenting false prophets. Two signs are revealed in the vision—an almond tree and a seething pot—both of which symbolize the nation's future destruction (11-19).

❶ “Before I formed you in the belly I knew you” (5). In Tanach, a prophet’s career is often opened with the recording of his inaugural prophecy which marks the transition from the human sphere to the prophetic one. This prophecy usually reveals the unique traits of the particular prophet. Yirmiyahu is the only prophet about whom it is told that he was chosen in utero. What might be the significance of this unusual detail?

❷ Yirmiyahu responds with uncertainty regarding his capabilities: “I cannot speak.” Hesitation is characteristic of novice prophets. Yirmiyahu’s response strongly echoes Moshe’s refusal, “I am not a man of words” (Shemot 4:10).

a) What is the meaning of Yirmiyahu’s claim? Consider the explanations of Radak and Abarbanel:

Radak: He intended to say [“I cannot speak”] words of rebuke: “for I am a child so how can I [speak words of rebuke] to an entire nation?”

Abarbanel: How can it be that You instilled me with knowledge and morals for I cannot speak nor organize my words as an intelligent person can.

b) God’s response is two-pronged, including both speech (7-8) and a symbolic act (9-10). What do these two halves share and how do they address Yirmiyahu’s hesitations? How does your conclusion also help explain Yirmiyahu’s designation in utero?

c) God’s response in pesukim 7-8 invokes the description of the (“true”) prophet in Devarim 18:18. Review the continuation of the section in Devarim (pesukim 19-20) and consider what additional challenge to Yirmiyahu’s career is suggested by this parallel.

❸ The first prophecy Yirmiyahu receives after his inauguration, is a prophecy of destruction which includes two distinct visions.

a) In the first vision, Yirmiyahu identifies a rod of an almond tree, a tree common to the area of Anatot. Aside from the phonetic similarity mentioned in the pasuk, why do you think God specifically chooses an almond tree as a representative symbol? Consider **Rashi’s** explanation:

The almond tree hurries to blossom before the other trees...a midrashic explanation: There are twenty-one days between the blossoming and ripening of the almond tree, which is parallel to the amount [of days] between the seventeenth of Tammuz when Yerushalayim was sieged and the ninth of Av.

b) God responds to Yirmiyahu with praise: “*You have seen well.*” What is good about his interpretation? Consider the explanations of Radak and Malbim and note their opposing understanding of God’s praise:

Radak: Because he saw the rod without leaves and flowers, yet he observed it in the prophecy and recognized that it was from an almond tree. Therefore God said “*you have seen well.*”

Malbim: Occasionally God brings destruction on man through hiding His face [הסתרת פנים]...and other times through direct providence...and about this He said “*you have seen well*”—because this development will be for the *well* being of Israel.

Perek 2

The last time a prophecy of destruction was heard in the kingdom of Yehuda was during the period of King Chizkiyahu and Yeshayahu the prophet. During the long reign of Menashe, son of Chizkiyahu, prophets were chased and murdered, a detail which is inferred from the end of this perek (pasuk 30). Yirmiyahu’s prophecy juxtaposes the rise of King Yoshiyahu, Menashe’s grandson, and parallels the renewal and religious reformation which Yoshiyahu initiates. Perek 2 includes Yirmiyahu’s first prophecy to the nation which opens with one of the most moving descriptions of God’s connection to His nation—“*I remember for you the affection of your youth*” (2). Immediately following this image, the prophecy sharply shifts to a description of the nation’s betrayal and abandonment of God, painting a clear picture of the bleak spiritual reality.

- 4 The word “*land*” connects the first section of the perek to the prophecy of destruction which follows and is repeated seven times throughout pesukim 1-7. Note this word’s appearances and the identities of the lands referenced. How is the sojourn in the desert described in pesukim 2 and 6? What sins serve as the focus of pasuk 7’s criticism?
- 5 “*And now what hast thou to do in the way to Egypt, to drink the waters of Shichor...*” In pasuk 18, the prophet rebukes the nation for requesting aid from two superpowers: Egypt in the south and Assyria in the north (see pesukim 36-

37 as well). What are the reasons for his objection? Consider the context of the pasuk, and specifically note the parallel images of ‘way’ and ‘water’ mentioned in pesukim 17 and 13 respectively.

- 6 Pesukim 20-25 describe the nation’s sin through a series of images borrowed from the human, animal, and plant worlds. What trait is criticized by all of these images?
- 7 The perek’s continuation rebukes the nation for its sin of murder. Pasuk 30 mentions the murder of prophets. How can this action be connected with the surrounding pesukim? Pasuk 34 references the case of a ‘break-in’ from Shemot 22:1. What is significant about the fact that the murderers were not found to be ‘breaking-in’?

Appendix

From Moshe to Yirmiyahu

Yirmiyahu’s inaugural prophecy reveals striking parallels between Yirmiyahu and Moshe. The midrash notes this similarity in Pesikta of Rav Kahana 13:

Rav Yehuda bar Simon opened: “*I will raise them up a prophet from among their brethren like you*” (Devarim 18:18). It is also written: “*And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moshe*” (34:10). And you say “*like you?*” Rather ‘like you’ in rebuke.

You find all that is written in one is written in the other: He [Moshe] prophesied for forty years and he [Yirmiyahu] prophesied for forty years; He prophesied for Yehuda and Yisrael and he prophesied for Yehuda and Yisrael; The sons of his tribe stood against him and the sons of his tribe stood against him; He is thrown in the Nile and he is thrown into a pit; He is saved by a maidservant and he is saved by a slave; He comes [and says] words of rebuke and he comes [and says] words of rebuke. Therefore the text had to specify and say “*the words of Yirmiyahu*” (1:1).

As we have already seen, the similarity between Moshe and Yirmiyahu is further emphasized by their shared opposition to a prophetic career due to their weak verbal capabilities. In addition, both struggle with a lack of faith in the nation. However, there is a critical difference between these two prophets: Moshe is the prophet of redemption. He is sent to redeem Israel

from Egyptian servitude and bring them into the land of Israel. Yirmiyahu, on the other hand, is sent to foretell the opposing process: exile from the land of Israel and enslavement to Babylonia. Moshe worries that the nation will not believe that the redemption is coming, while Yirmiyahu is skeptical that the nation will believe his doomsday predictions over the more appealing claims of the false prophets.

Rebbe Yehuda mentions the correlation between Moshe and Yirmiyahu's rebuke and bases his comparison on the related pesukim in Devarim 18: *"For these nations, that you are to dispossess, hearken unto soothsayers, and unto diviners; but as for you, the Lord your God has not suffered you so to do... I will raise them up a prophet from among their brethren, like you; and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I shall command him."* In fact God responds with similar words to Yirmiyahu: *"whatsoever I shall command you you shall speak... and the Lord said unto me: Behold, I have put My words in your mouth."*

It seems that Rebbe Yehuda's parallel contains additional significance. The reference from Devarim emphasizes the tension between the true prophet, who honestly reports the word of God, and the false prophet who says *"what I have not commanded him to speak."* Yirmiyahu's inaugural prophecy hints to his lifelong struggle with the false prophets. Yirmiyahu is part of the chain of true prophets led by Moshe's example. Despite the fact that it makes his life unbearably difficult, Yirmiyahu disseminates the word of God and acts solely on His behalf.

