YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Prophets vs. Empires: A Survey of Nevi’im Acharonim**

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**Shiur #30: The Reign of Yoshiyahu (2)**

**The “Book of the Torah” found in the house of God**

At the climax of the great purification – Yoshiyahu’s purge of idolatry – the king issues an order “to bring forth out of the Temple of the Lord all the vessels that were made for Ba’al and for the Ashera and for all the host of heaven, and he burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of Kidron… And he brought out the Ashera from the house of the Lord… and burned it at the brook of Kidron…” (*Melakhim* II 23:4-7).

After the purge, it was time for renovation, or *bedek habayit* (“repairing of the breaches” – *Melakhim* II 22:5).[[1]](#footnote-1) During this process, Chilkiyahu, the *Kohen Gadol*, found the “Book of the Torah” in the Temple (ibid. 22:8) and gave it to Shafan the scribe, who brought it and read it before the king. This reading generated an unprecedented upheaval:

And it came to pass, when the king heard the words of the Book of the Torah, that he rent his clothes… (22:11-13)

No one would tear his clothes after hearing the words of the Torah starting from “In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth”; listening to *Shemot*, *Vayikra*, or *Bamidbar* would likewise not produce this reaction, nor *Sefer Devarim* from beginning to end. [[2]](#footnote-2)

What, then, was written in the “Book of the Torah”; what is it that Yoshiyahu heard?

*Chazal* explain[[3]](#footnote-3) that it was an entire *sefer Torah*, which they found open to the section in *Devarim* that sets forth the covenant, with the blessings and the curses; this is what Yoshiyahu heard that let him to rend his garments.

Another possibility is that the section of the covenant – the blessings and the curses – was written alone,[[4]](#footnote-4) as a sort of essential summary, like the *parshiyot* of the *Shema* in *tefillin* and *mezuzot*.[[5]](#footnote-5) This section is referred to already in *Sefer Devarim* as a “*sefer* *Torah*”: the king is commanded to write “a copy of this Torah out of that which is written before the *kohanim*, the *leviim*” (*Devarim* 17:18), and Moshe commands that at the *Hak’hel* gathering the king is to read “this Torah before all of Israel in their hearing” (*Devarim* 31:11). This comes after Moshe himself writes “this Torah” and gives it to the *kohanim*, the sons of Levi, so that it can be placed “alongside the Ark of God’s Covenant” (ibid. 31:24-26) – and we know that the full *sefer Torah* was not yet complete, and these events are included within it.

It is also clear from *Sefer Shemot* (24:4-7) that Moshe writes the “Book of the Covenant” and reads “in the people’s hearing,” at the forging of the covenant at Sinai. We are likewise told, when the second set of Tablets is given (*Shemot* 34:27), that Moshe wrote “these things” for the purposes of the forging of the covenant, beyond the “ten things” which God wrote on the Tablets. In each of these instances the Torah, is clearly referring to short sections, similar to the *Shema*.

*Chazal*[[6]](#footnote-6) teach that the reading for the *Hak’hel* gathering includes the Ten Commandments and the *Shema*, the section on appointing a king, and the blessings and curses. No opinion among *Chazal* suggests that all of *Sefer Devarim* must be read – not to mention the entire Torah.

In any event, it is clear that Yoshiyahu was shocked when he heard the "blessings and curses.” The curses in *Sefer Vayikra* and in *Sefer Devarim* alike are certainly good reason for rending one's garments – especially if they are received and understood as a prophecy in the present. It is with great trepidation that Yoshiyahu dispatches his messengers to seek out God's word:

And the king commanded Chilkiya the scribe, and Achikam, son of Shafan, and Akhbor, son of Mikhiya, and Shafan the scribe, and Asaya, the king's servant, saying:

Go, inquire of the Lord for me and for the people and for all of Yehuda, concerning the words of this book that is found, for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us. (*Melakhim* II 22:12-13)

The delegation goes to Chulda the prophetess, perhaps motivated by the thought that a woman has a compassionate heart and is a better address in times of trouble (as *Chazal* understand the choice[[7]](#footnote-7)) – but her message is nevertheless a terrible one:

So says the Lord:

Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon its inhabitants – all the words of the book which the king of Yehuda has read,

Because they have forsaken Me… therefore My wrath shall be kindled against this place, and it shall not be quenched. (Ibid. 15-17)

A similar message had been uttered in Yoshiyahu's time by Tzefanya (Chapter 1). According to the hypothesis I have suggested, it was that prophecy of Tzefanya that had set in motion Yoshiyahu's campaign of purification; Yoshiyahu returned to the way of God because of Tzefanya, who continued the line of prophecy from the time of Yeshayahu and Chizkiyahu.

Now, however, Chulda conveys the same message in all its brutal severity as a live, concrete prophecy matching the terrible curses written in the "Book of the Torah.”

Are all of Yoshiyahu's efforts worth nothing?

Chulda's prophecy awards Yoshiyahu a "postponement" of the punishment for the remaining years of his life, because he subjugated himself "before God" and rent his garments. Therefore, he will not see with his own eyes "all the evil" that is destined to come (*Melakhim* II 22:19-20). King Yoshiyahu is not broken at this news; on the contrary, he intensifies his activity. Just as he had previously embarked on his great purge spurred on by Tzefanya's prophecy, so Chulda's prophecy energizes him for the great *tikkun* of the Pesach gathering, the likes of which had never been seen (*Melakhim* II 23:22), in the 18th year of his reign. At that gathering, they read "the words of the Torah" (the same "words of the covenant,” *Devarim* 28:69) from the Book and accept upon themselves the "renewal of the covenant.”

The celebration of this great Pesach is described at length in *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 35.

**The Vision of Nachum**

**The "burden of Nineveh" – the closing of accounts**

Two prophets came from the Galilee: Yona, from Gat Chefer (east of Tzippori), and Nachum, from Elkosh (next to Ma'alot Tarshicha). Yona was eager for "the burden of Nineveh, the vision of Nachum" (*Nachum* 1:1) – i.e., the downfall of Nineveh before it could wreak havoc on the nations and destroy the kingdom of Israel; therefore, he flees to Tarshish:

For I know that You are a gracious God, and compassionate [even towards the wicked!], long-suffering and abundant in mercy, and repent of the evil. (*Yona* 4:2)

Two hundred years later, the cruelty of the Assyrian conquerors has been fully realized. During the reign of Yoshiyahu, Nachum utters his prophecy concerning the closing of that account:

The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord avenges and is full of wrath; the Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies.

The Lord is long-suffering and great in power, and will by no means clear the guilty… (*Nachum* 1:2-3)

The "burden" prophecies share extensive similarities,[[8]](#footnote-8) and the "vision of Nachum" is a classic example. Each includes

1. God's repayment of the sins of the nations in general, and a detailed description of the punishment that is destined to befall them;
2. A prophecy of salvation and deliverance for Israel, in a small number of verses inserted within the description of punishment for the nations.

With the exception of Yona, prophets were generally not dispatched to the nations. The repayment and punishment promised to the nations is generally meant for an Israelite audience. We must therefore view the few verses devoted to the deliverance of Israel as the heart of these prophecies.

There is only one event during the time of Nachum that the prophet's words could refer to, and that is the Pesach of Yoshiyahu (*Melakhim* II 23:21-23; *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 35).

In view of the great fear among the people of Yehuda of a campaign of punishment, like the campaign of Sancheriv, Nachum utters explicit words of encouragement:

Trouble shall not rise up a second time….

So says the Lord: Although [the Assyrians] are in full strength, and likewise many, even so they shall be cut down, and [their time] shall pass,

And though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more…

For the wicked one shall no more pass through you; he is utterly cut off." (*Nachum* 1:9 – 2:1)

**“The footsteps of a herald”**

Some 14 years[[9]](#footnote-9) after the great Pesach held by Chizkiyahu, with the participation of many Israelites of the northern tribes (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 30), Chizkiyahu rebelled against Assyria (in a pact with Egypt), bringing upon Yehuda the catastrophe of Sancheriv's campaign: the fall of the cities in the lowlands of Yehuda, the breaching of the walls of Lachish, and the exile of its population along with tens of thousands more inhabitants of Yehuda. All this becomes the background to the submission to and assimilation into the Assyrian milieu adopted as policy by Menashe and his ministers. There is no one in Yehuda whose memory and psyche are not seared by these events.

Now, about a century later, Yoshiyahu returns to Chizkiyahu's path in serving God, purging the kingdom of the pagan idols and *bamot,* and completely ignoring the Assyrian rule over the northern – previously Israelite – territories. Between the 12th and 18th years of his reign (628-622 B.C.E.), Yoshiyahu undertakes a bold purging of Shomron and the Galilee (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 34:6-7) as though the Assyrians had already disappeared, and as though Nineveh were already in ruins following conquest by the Medes – an event that would take place only a decade later (612 B.C.E.).

Many in Jerusalem, and even (apparently) in the king's palace, were trembling with fear lest Yoshiyahu bring upon them another trauma like the campaign of Sancheriv.

It is this fear that Nachum responds to with his explicit assurance that there will be no new Assyrian campaign:

Keep your holidays, Yehuda; perform your vows, for the wicked one shall no more pass through you; he is utterly cut off. (*Nachum* 2:1)

Indeed, the Pesach of Yoshiyahu is celebrated with great joy, in accordance with the vision of Nachum (in the style of Yeshayahu): "Behold, upon the mountains, the footsteps of a herald, announcing peace!" (2:1). The young Yirmiyahu, too, had also taken part in the renewal of the covenant.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Returning to Yirmiyahu (from Chapter 11)**

**The covenant in the time of Yoshiyahu**

The second unit in the prophecies of Yirmiyahu (Chapters 11-20) starts once again at the beginning of his prophecy, in the time of Yoshiyahu – this time, at the renewal of the covenant, in the 18th year of Yoshiyahu’s reign (*Melakhim* II 23:1-3):

So says the Lord God of Israel: Cursed is the man who does not hear the words of this covenant

Which I commanded your fathers on the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the iron furnace…

You shall be My people, and I will be your God,

That I may establish the oath which I swore to your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as at this day… (*Yirmiyahu* 11:3-5)

The style of this unit sounds entirely unlike Yirmiyahu; it echoes Moshe's style, from the ceremony of the covenant in *Sefer Devarim*[[11]](#footnote-11) (Chapters 4-5 and 26-29). The framing of the Egyptian exile as a purification of *Am Yisrael* in the "iron furnace" can be traced to Moshe in *Sefer Devarim*:

But the Lord has taken you and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be unto Him a people of inheritance, as you are this day. (*Devarim* 4:20)

Yirmiyahu responds with the only answer possible for one who enters the covenant:

Then I answered, and said, Amen, O Lord. (*Yirmiyahu* 11:5)

In the next section, we find expressions that are typical of Yirmiyahu, such as “forewarning early and often” (11:7), explaining Yirmiyahu’s special mission in the 18th year of Yoshiyahu’s reign: to disseminate the “words of the covenant” throughout “the cities of Yehuda and the open places of Jerusalem” (11:6).

Yoshiyahu spearheads a great ceremony at the Temple with the *kohanim* and the ministers, while Yirmiyahu, the rustic prophet and *kohen* from Anatot, is dispatched to the simple people who are not involved in the important goings-on in the royal house, to persuade them to abandon the path of Menashe and Amon and to return to the covenant of Moshe.

In the third and fourth sections (11:9-13), we hear of the violation of the covenant, and the punishment; hence, the text here is already a reflection of the reign of Yehoyakim: “They have turned back to the iniquities of their fathers…” (11:10).

**Desecration of Shabbat in Jerusalem**

What is the biblical view of Shabbat observance, and of Shabbat desecration?

We can find the same answer in the Torah and in the *Nevi’im*:

* In *Sefer Shemot* (16:22-30), Shabbat observance entails a prohibition on going out to collect food (*man*) and bring it back into the tent.
* At the establishment of the *Mishkan* (*Shemot* 36:6-7), the bringing of building materials to the construction site, by any “man or woman,” is defined as “*melakha*” (productive labor); this labor is therefore prohibited by the exhortation concerning Shabbat observance (ibid. 35:2).
* In the time of Amos and Yeshayahu (1:13-14), the marketplace was closed on Shabbat and also on Rosh Chodesh, even in the kingdom of Israel, and the prophets railed against injustice, oppression, and deceit in a society that observed Shabbat, with crooks having to wait until after Shabbat, “saying, When will Rosh Chodesh be over, that we may sell grain, and Shabbat… That we might buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes…” (*Amos* 8:5-6).
* Yirmiyahu (17:22-27) warns against taking a load or bringing a load through the gates of Jerusalem (i.e., holding an open market) on Shabbat.
* Nechemia (13:15-22) wages a mighty struggle against the market being open on Shabbat, and eventually has it closed under close supervision. The closure of the gates of Jerusalem created a physical separation between the merchants on the outside and the buyers inside the city. When there were no buyers, the merchants stopped setting up their stalls; they stopped treading grapes and loading produce on their donkeys; all forms of *melakha* were halted.

In every instance – and also today – public desecration of Shabbat means an open marketplace for food and building materials. Public Shabbat observance means a marketplace that is closed!

When and how was the bastion of Shabbat breached, in between Amos and Yirmiyahu?

In the time of Menashe!

Once the barrier of pagan worship was crossed, the sanctity of Shabbat was next to fall. Hence, Yirmiyahu’s prophecy concerning Shabbat (17:19-25) was uttered in the time of Yoshiyahu, when the house of David still stood a chance at survival:

And it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey Me, says the Lord, to bring in no burden through the gates of this city on the day of Shabbat, but to sanctify the day of Shabbat, to perform no work on it,

Then there shall enter in by the gates of this city kings and princes sitting upon the throne of David… and this city shall be inhabited forever. (*Yirmiyahu* 17:24-25)

This is another important prophecy of Yirmiyahu’s younger years, from the period of the great *teshuva* of Yoshiyahu.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The chapters in *Melakhim* are not in chronological order; the great purge (Chapter 23) preceded the “repairing of the breaches” and the discovery of the Book (Chapter 22). *Chazal* teach that “there is no chronological order in the Torah” (*Pesachim* 6b); we may certainly assume that this is also true of *Nevi’im*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are biblical scholars who consider this description as “clear evidence” that *Sefer Devarim* was written in its entirety at this time, but Yoshiyahu’s shock disproves this hypothesis. In addition, the eradication of the *bamot* (in accordance with *Parashat Re’eh*) began in the time of Chizkiyahu. Of course, the altar at Mount Eval, which alone is mentioned explicitly in *Sefer Devarim*, had been concealed and covered with the establishment of the *Mishkan* in Shilo, many generations previously; see A. Zertal, *Am Nolad*, chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Yoma* 52b states that Yoshiyahu buried the Ark because he saw the verse from the curses, “The Lord will lead you, and your king who you place over you, to a nation which you and your forefathers have not known…” (*Devarim* 28:36). Rashi, commenting on *Melakhim* II 22:13, relates this to the rending of his garments and his dispatch in the following verses of a delegation to seek God’s word. According to the *Midrash ha-Gadol* (on *Devarim* 27:26), at the top of the page was written, “Cursed be he who does not uphold the words of this Torah, to perform them,” and according to the Yerushalmi (*Sota* 7:5; 21d), it was over this line that Yoshiyahu rent his garments and declared, “I must uphold them.” This is Yoshiyahu’s defining characteristic: he takes upon himself full responsibility to uphold and repair – to restore and re-establish the covenant of the Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For elaboration on this possibility see my book (with Rav S. Barukhi), *Mikraot le-Parashat Mishpatim*, in the chapter on *Sefer Ha-brit*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. From the time of Ezra onwards no further summarizing sections were written and everything is read from an entire *Sefer Torah*, except for *tefillin*, *mezuzot*, and *parashat* *sota,* which are all explicitly commanded to be written, for all generations. All the sections which contain any mention of being specially written by Moshe – the war against Amalek (Shemot 17:14), the “Book of the Covenant” (*Shemot* 24:7 and seemingly also 34:27), the “Book of the Wars of God” (*Bamidbar* 21:14), and apparently also “And it was, when the Ark travelled…” (*Bamidbar* 10:35-36), “These are the journeys of *Bnei Yisrael*…” (*Bamidbar* 33:2), the “Book of the Torah” (Devarim 31:9, 24-26) and the song of Haazinu (Devarim 31:22) - are all included in the *Sefer* Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tosefta *Sota* chapter 7,17; Bavli *Sota* 41a. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Megillah* 14b, according to R. Sheila. If we follow R. Yochanan's view that Yirmiyahu was busy bringing back the ten tribes, we must say that Tzefanya was no longer alive at the time the *sefer* was found. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Like most of the "burden" prophecies in *Yeshayahu* Chapters 13-23. The instances that are exceptions to the rule (such as *Yeshayahu* 22, *Chavakuk* 1, *Malakhi* 1) require some explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For the calculation of this hiatus, see my book (with Rav Benny Lau), *Yeshayahu – ke-Tzipporim Afot,* pp. 194-199 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See below regarding *Yirmiyahu* 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The style of *Sefer Devarim* was popular during the time of Yoshiyahu and Yirmiyahu, seemingly owing to the influence of the covenant and the "Book of the Torah.” This is in no way an indication of the time of its composition. In *Sefer Yeshayahu*, too, we find extensive echoes of *Sefer Devarim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)