**Daniel and the Greek Kingdom**

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Translated by David Strauss

According to what is stated at the beginning of the book of Daniel, in the third year of the reign of Yehoyakim, king of Yehuda, Nevuchadnetzar, the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and took the children of Israel as captives:

Youths in whom there was no blemish, but fair to look on, and skillful in all wisdom, and skillful in knowledge, and discerning in thought, and such as had ability to stand in the king's palace; and that he should teach them the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans. (*Daniel* 1:4)

These youths included Daniel and his three friends – Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya. From this point onwards, Daniel grows up in the royal palace. Like Yosef in his day, Daniel interprets Nevuchadnetzar's dreams and becomes the chief minister in the Babylonian kingdom.

In this essay, we will examine the strong connection between the prophecies concerning the end of days in the book of *Daniel* and the kingdom of the Greeks and the Hasmonean victory over them.

### The First Dream

The first dream of Nevuchadnetzar that was interpreted by Daniel was that of a great image smitten by a stone:

You, O king, saw, and behold a great image. This image, which was mighty, and whose brightness was surpassing, stood before you; and the appearance thereof was terrible. As for that image, its head was of fine gold, its breast and its arms of silver, its belly and its thighs of brass, its legs of iron, its feet part of iron and part of clay. You saw till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon its feet that were of iron and clay, and broke them to pieces. Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken in pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing-floors; and the wind carried them away, so that no place was found for them; and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth. (*Daniel* 2:31-35)

What this dream means, as Daniel interpreted it, is that the four kingdoms will fight each other, until a fifth kingdom will come and smite them:

You, O king, king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the strength, and the glory; and wherever the children of men, the beasts of the field, and the fowls of the heaven dwell, has He given them into your hand, and has made you to rule over them all; you are the head of gold.And after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to you; and another third kingdom of brass, which shall rule over all the earth. And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron… And whereas you saw the feet and toes, part of potters' clay and part of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom; but there shall be in it of the firmness of the iron, forasmuch as you saw the iron mixed with miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were part of iron and part of clay, so part of the kingdom shall be strong, and part thereof broken. And whereas you saw the iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves by the seed of men; but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron does not mingle with clay. And in the days of those kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed; nor shall the kingdom be left to another people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, but it shall stand forever. (*Daniel* 2:37-45)

What is the meaning of this dream? What are the five kingdoms? The first kingdom is clearly that of Nevuchadnetzar himself, but what are the other kingdoms?

The conventional understanding of this dream links these kingdoms to the kingdoms of Persia and Media, Greece, and Rome. The Roman kingdom will rule for a long time, until the kingdom of God will come and smite it (see, for example, *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Teruma* 6).

The difficulties with this understanding are self-evident, for there have been many kingdoms, far more than four, that have disappeared from the world – yet the prophecy that "God shall be king over all the earth" (*Zekharya* 14:16) has not yet been fulfilled.

It might therefore be suggested that Daniel did not actually see all the way to the days of the Messiah. In a similar manner, Yaakov Avinu, when he blessed his sons and foresaw what would happen to them in the "end of days" (*Bereishit* 49:1), was blocked from seeing the end, instead seeing only as far as the *Mishkan* in Shilo, but no further. It is therefore possible that it was also not necessary for Daniel to see all of human history, thousands of years after his time.

It thus seems that the kingdoms mentioned by Daniel are other kingdoms. The head of gold is the kingdom of Nevuchadnetzar; the breast and arms of silver are the kingdom of Persian and Media; the belly and thighs of brass are the kingdom of Alexander the Great, who ruled after them; and the legs of iron and clay are the kingdom of the Successors (the Diodochi), the senior commanders of Alexander's army, who fought among themselves after Alexander's death, until the kingdom (in *Eretz Yisrael*) was divided between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids.

Why did Daniel only foresee until the divided kingdom of Greece, and not as far as the kingdom of Rome that followed it? I believe that the essence of Daniel's vision relates to the kingdom of God that came after the reign of the Ptolemies and Seleucids – the kingdom of the Hasmoneans. It is in that kingdom and in the miracles that were performed in the Temple on its behalf that Daniel sees the appearance of the eternal kingdom of God. Indeed, the Hasmonean kingdom is the first Jewish kingdom since the loss of Israel's independence with the death of Yoshiyahu king of Yehuda at the end of the First Temple period. The miracles that were performed on behalf of the Hasmonean kingdom are a sign of the resting of the *Shekhina* on the people of Israel in anticipation of the redemption. It is possible that had we been worthy, it would have been God's will that Israel's redemption would have been eternal. But free will is stronger than all this, and the Hasmonean kingdom veered from the path of God and from the path of righteousness and justice in other directions following the deaths of the righteous sons of Matityahu. Daniel's visions therefore remained for a distant redemption, which we hope will come soon in our day.

### 2,300

Another vision of Daniel is presented later in the book, one which seems to include a precise date for the coming of the redemption:

And I saw in the vision: Now it was so, that when I saw, I was in Shushan the castle, which is in the province of Elam… And I lifted up my eyes, and saw, and, behold, there stood before the stream a ram which had two horns… I saw the ram pushing westward, and northward, and southward; and no beasts could stand before him, neither was there any that could deliver out of his hand; but he did according to his will, and magnified himself. And as I was considering, behold, a he-goat came from the west over the face of the whole earth, and touched not the ground… And he came to the ram that had the two horns, which I saw standing before the stream, and ran at him in the fury of his power… and he smote the ram, and broke his two horns; and there was no power in the ram to stand before him; but he cast him down to the ground, and trampled upon him; and there was none that could deliver the ram out of his hand. And the he-goat magnified himself exceedingly; and when he was strong, the great horn was broken; and instead of it there came up the appearance of four horns toward the four winds of heaven… Then I heard a holy one speaking; and another holy one said unto that certain one who spoke, “How long shall be the vision concerning the continual burnt-offering, and the transgression that causes appalment, to give both the sanctuary and the host to be trampled underfoot?” And he said to me, “**To two thousand and three hundred evenings and mornings; then shall the sanctuary be victorious.**”(*Daniel* 8:2-14)

The meaning of this vision is presented explicitly in the continuation of that chapter:

And he said, “Behold, I will make you know what shall be in the latter time of the indignation; for it belongs to the appointed time of the end. The ram which you saw having the two horns – they are the kings of Media and Persia. And the rough he-goat is the king of Greece; and the great horn that is between his eyes is the first king. And as for that which was broken, in the place whereof four stood up, four kingdoms shall stand up out of the nation, but not with his power. And in the latter time of their kingdom, when the transgressors have completed their transgression, there shall stand up a king of fierce countenance and understanding stratagems. And his power shall be mighty, but not by his own power; and he shall destroy wonderfully, and shall prosper and do; and he shall destroy them that are mighty and the people of the saints. And through his cunning he shall cause craft to prosper in his hand; and he shall magnify himself in his heart, and in time of security shall he destroy many; he shall also stand up against the prince of princes; but he shall be broken without hand.” (*Daniel* 8:19-25)

We see that Scripture explicitly states that the king of Greece will defeat the king of Persia, that his kingdom will eventually split into four, and that one of them will persecute the people of Israel. To the question posed by "the holy one speaking," "the certain one who spoke" answers: "To two thousand and three hundred evenings and mornings; then shall the sanctuary be victorious."

Most commentators understand that the number of 2,300 relates to the arrival of the future redemption. R. Sa'adya Gaon explains that this refers to 788 CE, 2,300 years after the Exodus from Egypt. Rashi suggests that this is the year 1397 CE, and R. Yitzchak Abravanel proposes a calculation that brings it to 1504 CE. All of these dates, as well as others suggested by other calculators of the ultimate redemption, have passed – yet the redemption has not arrived.

I wish to propose once again that Daniel did not look far off thousands of years into the future, but only as far as the days of the Hasmoneans. Perhaps the number of 2,300 is not the number of years, nor even the number of days, but rather the number of daily offerings that were not brought. The book of Maccabees teaches us that the Greeks controlled the Temple and shut down the sacrificial service for slightly more than three years – in other words, for at most 1,140 days (if two of the three years were intercalated). On each of these days, one daily offering should have been brought in the morning and another in the afternoon – altogether 2,280 daily offerings. Scripture often rounds up to the next hundred or thousand, and so we reach the number mentioned in Daniel's vision – 2,300. The sacrifice of these daily offerings had been stopped, and they resumed with the redemption and the renewal of the independent kingdom of Israel in the days of the Hasmoneans.

### The Last Vision

At the end of the book of Daniel, a long vision is presented in which the history of the kingdom of Persia and the history of the kingdom of Greece are spelled out. The history of the kingdom of Greece is described in great detail, with the various intrigues and events that took place in it (*Daniel* 11:3-27). Daniel describes in great detail how "a mighty king" will arise – Alexander the Great – and how after his death, "his kingdom shall be broken, and it shall be divided toward the four winds of heaven," and in the end it will be given to "the king of the south" (Ptolemy and his dynasty) and "the king of the north" (Seleucus I and his dynasty). Daniel continues to describe the history of the Greek kingdom, with all its details and with great accuracy.

What is the nature of all this in Daniel's vision? For what reason did he see all these conspiracies and wars? According to our understanding, the essence of Daniel’s vision was the kingdom of Greece. He describes in detail the alliances, marriages, poisonings, intrigues, treacheries, and wars between the two factions of Alexander's heirs, because of their strong connection with the history of the Jewish People in *Eretz* *Yisrael*. The parties to these wars often tried to involve the Jews in their intrigues and to enlist the Jews to cooperate with them. The Jews themselves split into sects and exploited the external schism to advance internal wars among themselves and the various conspiracies of those hungry for power, who broke the unity of the people and the rule of Torah over them. These conflicts ultimately brought about the great confrontation between "those who uphold the covenant" and "those who do wickedly against the covenant," about whom Daniel speaks later in the vision. It is possible that Daniel sees (and rightly so!) the connection between the external division and the internal division, which is the essence of his vision and the essence of his spiritual struggle.

Indeed, when we examine Daniel's last vision, we see that a central theme is the internal conflict within the Jewish People, between those who uphold the covenant and those who have abandoned it:

And such as do wickedly against the covenant shall be corrupt by blandishments; but the people that know their God shall show strength and prevail. (*Daniel* 11:32).

This vision is, of course, connected to the decrees of the Greek oppressor against the covenant and the Temple.

### Religious War

The kingdom of Greece is the first – both in prophetic vision and in reality – to conduct a consistent and all-out war against Israel's covenant with God, against the observance of the Torah and its commandments. This war is not against the Jewish nation, like Nevuchadnetzar's war against Jerusalem, nor is it against the very existence of the Jewish People, like the decrees of Haman. This is a war that does not set man as a leaf driven by the wind, by forces greater than him and determining his fate. The Greek kingdom's decrees against the Torah and its commandments clearly left free choice in the hands of every person, enabling him to be a "soldier" ​​of faith, the covenant, and the Torah, and to endanger his life and even sacrifice it for the sake of preserving them. On the other hand, the kingdom of Greece allowed a person to accept its decrees – for the sake of his survival and comfort, and to rid himself of the yoke of Torah and *mitzvot* – and thereby improve his personal status in the reconstituted Jewish society.

The dangers and challenges posed by such decrees to the people of Israel are extremely significant. It was therefore necessary that there be a detailed and accurate vision for many generations, foreseeing the test that the Jewish People would face, which would give it spiritual support and hope for redemption, and inform all the world that God exists, that He is all-knowing, and that He will reward those who fear Him and punish those who stir up His anger.

These visions were revealed to Daniel well before the rise of the Greek kingdom. Daniel and his friends, Chananya, Mishael and Azarya, were ahead of their time in the first exile, establishing the law of martyrdom for the sanctification of God's name and the preservation of the covenant of Torah and *mitzvot.* They did so when they risked their lives while they were in Nevuchadnetzar's palace, refusing to eat anything but seeds so that they would not be defiled by the king's food (*Daniel* 1:8-17). Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya did this once again when they were ministers, refusing to bow down before a golden image of Nevuchadnetzar (*Daniel* 13). Daniel acted in this way again when he prayed for the ruins of Jerusalem despite the decree of the officers of Darius the Mede (*Daniel* 9).

Later, during the reign of the kings of Greece, the Halakha established by Daniel and his friends became a way of life for all those for whom keeping the covenant was precious. There were those, like R. Yose ben Yoezer, the head of the Sanhedrin, who were hanged because they kept Torah and *mitzvot* (*Bereishit Rabba* 65:22); there were women who risked their lives for the circumcision of their sons, and were killed together with them (II *Maccabees* 6); and there were many who preferred to die rather than eat unclean foods (I *Maccabees* 2). There is the well-known story of the woman and her seven sons, who refused to bow down before an idol and were sentenced to a torturous death (*Gittin* 57b).

It is possible that Greek culture, which was rich in material and in spirit – the "culture of the West," to which the Jewish People became exposed for the first time in their history – was reason for God to warn against its dangers already in the days of Chananya, Mishael and Azarya. The great devotion that was needed to resist it was one of the reasons for the promise made to Daniel in his vision that the kingdom of Israel and the *Shekhina* would come (in the days of the Hasmoneans) with the victory in the struggle over this culture.

Another unique difficulty that Greek culture posed to the spiritual existence of the people of Israel involves Alexander's policy during his conquests. Alexander paid his soldiers for their work with land in the countries that he conquered. In this way, the Holy Land soon became filled with a foreign people whom we had never encountered before – in fact, with a mix of nations that shared a single culture, the culture of Greece. Identity shifted from national identity to cultural identity. Such a large number of foreigners who came here to settle among the native inhabitants could have broken the local spirit, the spirit of Torah and faith. This culture also led to many cases of intermarriage between the soldiers and local women.

The guardians of circumcision and the sanctity of the seed of the Jewish People stood in the breach and tried to stop the phenomenon. It is not surprising that decrees against circumcision stood at the center of the struggle, and it is possible that this is what Daniel refers to when he speaks of "those who do wickedly against the covenant." It took a tremendous spiritual effort, in the wake of Daniel and his friends, to defeat the Greeks and Hellenism and to restore the *Shekhina* to Zion.

### Freedom and the Torah

As we interpreted the vision of Daniel, the struggle of the guardians of the covenant against those who did wickedly against it was the final struggle before the appearance of the kingdom of Israel on the throne of God. Had we been worthy, the Hasmonean kingdom would have established its throne forever, and presumably the one who sat on the royal throne would have been replaced by a scion of the house of David.

Like many of the struggles over Israel's freedom, the Hasmonean struggle began as a struggle for the preservation of the Torah. The struggle for Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt also began as a struggle for their basic right to worship their God and sacrifice to Him after a three-day journey. It was only when Pharaoh did not respond to this basic religious demand that the struggle broke out in full force, and this is what led to full liberation from slavery in Egypt. This was also the case in the days of the Hasmoneans: the struggle began with Matityahu as a struggle for the right of those who served the God of Israel to fulfill their duties toward their God. It continued, under the leadership of his son Yehuda, as a struggle for national liberation from the Greek-Syrian world.

As stated, had we been worthy, the Hasmonean kingdom would have established its throne forever, and Daniel's visions would have been fulfilled in it. Since we were not worthy, and kingdom was restored at that time to Israel for only two hundred years, and those visions remain in place and await the day that the eternal kingdom of God will be established in the world.