YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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

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**Shiur #24: Yeshayahu and His Disciples, from the Time of Menashe Until the Destruction (1)**

**Introduction**

Yeshayahu ben Amotz was very active in Jerusalem. He described a vision of God’s glory (Chapter 6), went out together with his son Shear Yashuv to meet King Achaz (7:3), went “naked and barefoot” for three years (20:3), and maintained intensive contact with Chizkiyahu, his protégé (Chapters 37-39).

From Chapter 40 onwards, the text describes nothing more of what he did.

This is one of the reasons for the assumption, considered foundational in biblical research,[[1]](#footnote-1) that Chapters 40 onward (and perhaps also Chapters 34-35) belong to a different prophet (referred to as “Isaiah II”) who lived at the time of the return to the land from Babylonian exile – when Koresh (Cyrus, mentioned in Chapters 44 and 45) was a living actor and the call to the Jews to leave Chaldean Babylonia and return to Tzion (Chapter 47) had a potential audience that could hear and obey it.

I do not wish to deal with the “theological” question that arises with regard to the identity of “Isaiah II” for the simple reason that, in my opinion, this theory has no basis – neither in the language of the relevant chapters of *Yeshayahu* (40-66) nor in the reality of life at the time of the return from Babylon. To my mind, it also has no scientific basis: during the Babylonian exile, the Hebrew language absorbed extensive Akkadian and Aramaic influences, as reflected in the language of Yechezkel, and the Hebrew of the early Second Temple Period is already very different from the biblical Hebrew of Yeshayahu throughout his entire book.

All of these arguments will be clarified below, along with an alternative suggestion: that the two parts of the book are written by Yeshayahu and those of his disciples who continued the “prophetic study hall” that Yeshayahu had founded, especially during the reign of Menashe, when the prophets were forced to operate in secret for fear of persecution by the henchmen of Menashe and Amon. The details will become clear over the course of our study of Chapters 40-49, and especially in Chapters 50-59. The last chapters, 60-66, date to the end of the First Temple Period, and they all continue the prophecies of Yeshayahu ben Amotz.

Proof of this lies in both the ideas and the style of these chapters.[[2]](#footnote-2) The language of Chapters 40-66 is the biblical Hebrew of the period of the monarchy[[3]](#footnote-3) and it is unlike the language of Yechezkel, in exile, or of the returnees from Babylonia. It is not the language of Zerubavel, nor of Ezra and Nechemia, nor of Chaggai and Zecharia, who prophesied during the Second Temple Period, nor of *Divrei Ha-yamim* (whose authors tried to the best of their ability to use biblical Hebrew).

In addition, the reality of the beginning of the Second Temple Period in Yehuda is completely incompatible with the holistic and deeply comforting vision of consolation that is the central theme of *Sefer Yeshayahu* from near the start (Chapter 11) until the end (60-62). That reality included no ingathering of the exiles “from the south and from the west,” nor do we have records of any struggle by the prophets of that period against Jews who practiced idolatry.

It is important to understand at the outset that Yeshayahu ben Amotz was more than just a prophet. He was a teacher and he had disciples (he calls them “*limudim*” – 8:16-17; 50:4); he established a school for prophets in which visions were uttered in poetic language, like chapters of *Tehillim* (12:24-27; 30:29; 38:9-20); and prophets who continued after him, such as Mikha, Tzefania, Nachum, and Chabakuk, quoted his verses and ideas.

Yeshayahu had disciples who were prophets themselves, and who continued his tradition: they quoted from his prophecies and fought against those who worshipped idols and against those who were in favor of remaining in exile, in view of the great despair that prevailed in the time of Menashe and afterwards, until the end of the First Temple Period. These anonymous prophets, who spoke Yeshayahu’s language and quoted him, were the natural, seamless continuation of the vision of Yeshayahu ben Amotz.

One of them described having being chosen while still in the womb to speak sanctified words, as a continuation of his teacher’s prophecy:

The Lord has called me from the womb; from my mother’s bowels He made mention of my name.

And He had my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of His hand He hid me…

And He said to me, You are My servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified. (49:1-3)

**Prophecies of consolation: When were they said, and when were they realized?**

**(Chapter 40)**[[4]](#footnote-4)

On “Shabbat Nachamu” [the Shabbat after Tish’a be-Av] of the year 1920, the British Commissioner Lord Herbert Samuel – a Jew and a Zionist – came to the Churva synagogue in the Old City, where he was given the honor of reading the *haftarah*:[[5]](#footnote-5)

Be comforted, be comforted, My people, says your God.

Speak earnestly to [literally, ‘to the heart of’] Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her time of service is accomplished; her guilt is paid off… (*Yeshayahu* 40:1-2)

The congregation was moved to tears. After two thousand years of exile, wandering, and oppression, Jerusalem had a Jewish governor, by virtue of the Balfour Declaration and the decision of the League of Nations, like Zerubavel (and Nechemia) at the beginning of the Second Temple Period: “Hear, O you deaf ones, and look, you who are blind, that you may see.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This prophecy was not uttered and recorded for posterity at the time of the Balfour Declaration, just as it was not recorded at the time of Cyrus’s declaration. Prophecies are not written at the time when they are realized.

Astonishing prophecies that foretold the future were also uttered by philosophers and leaders who did not view themselves as prophets; fortunately, we have documentation of when such utterances were made.

Rav Yehuda Alkalai wrote, in 1840:

What the holy *Zohar* teaches … concerning the calculation of the sixth century (of the sixth millennium, as the time of the Redemption)… isn’t talking about a single year… And the sixth century will last a hundred years, from now until the year 5698, and after that comes the year 5700, heaven forefend.” (*Shelom Yerushalayim*, *Kitvei ha-Rav Alkalai* I, p. 34)

The Holocaust began a hundred years later, in the year 1940.

In 1905, Yosef Chaim Brenner wrote:

Six million [Jews] hanging by a burnt strand of hair; bring us a cave that we might hide ourselves in it. (*Collected Writings* III, p. 90)

Herzl wrote in his diary on September 3rd, 1897:

In Basel, I founded the Jewish State. If I were to say this out loud today, I would be greeted by laughter on all sides. Perhaps in five years, fifty at most, everyone will know it.

The resolution recognizing a Jewish state in the land of Israel was accepted at the UN exactly fifty years later, on November 29th, 1947.

Such foresight is possible, and it is attained sometimes even by mere thinkers and dreamers; how much more so by prophets.

**Faith vs. Worship**

**Fundamental beliefs from *Sefer Bereishit*; Who is in charge of history? (Chapters 41-42)**

The “Creator of the ends of the earth,” who “measured the waters by stride,” “meted out heaven with the span,” and calculated the dust of the earth, “all with a measure” (40:12), is also the One “who called the generations from the beginning” (41:4) and who chose Avraham – “the seed of Avraham, My friend” (40:8).

To whom is this lesson on *Sefer Bereishit* addressed and then repeated so many times? The answer is: to a Jewish audience that had despaired completely of faith in God.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Following the destruction of Shomron and the exile of the masses of the northern tribes, Chizkiyahu still managed to celebrate Pesach in Jerusalem with many of the remnants who had remained in the north.[[8]](#footnote-8) But after the destruction of Lachish and a huge exile from Yehuda as well, there was no strength left to sing praises over the deliverance of Jerusalem, and despair settled over the kingdom with the ascent of (twelve-year-old) Menashe to the throne.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Jerusalem was immersed in worship of the gods of Assyria and Babylonia, who appeared to be the big “winners” of the wars in the ancient world. It proved extremely difficult to maintain faith in the One Creator of the world, who had chosen Israel, and who alone steered history.

The first part of *Sefer Yeshayahu* (Chapters 1-29) contains not a single instance of the prophet mocking the creation of wooden idols and covering them with silver and gold – simply because there were none. Beginning with Chapter 30, however, this phenomenon is referred to again and again, in all its lowliness and vulgarity: “The image which the craftsman melted…” (40:19). Profound despair and loss of hope caused the Jews, from the time of Menashe onward, to worship wood of the royal storehouse, fashioned into an idol (40:20).

The consolation that suffuses these chapters is a vision for the future uttered by a prophet who was almost alone in his full faith among hopeless Jews who are worshipping idols. In the period of consolation at the beginning of the Second Temple Period, despite all the difficulties, there was no need for this sort of direct battle against widespread worship of gold-covered wooden idols, requiring a return to the foundations of faith in God – from the beginning, from *bereishit*.

**Vision of redemption vs. bitter reality**

A selective reading of these prophecies (as in the *haftarot* of consolation) can be misleading. We should not ignore the harsh verses describing the state of the nation at the time of the prophecy.

The audience to which these prophecies were addressed did not experience the consolation. Rather, they were “robbed and spoiled, all of them snared in holes and hidden in prison-houses; they are for prey, and there is none to deliver them…” (42:22).

Descriptions of consolation and principles of faith are all the prophet has left in his arsenal to combat the terrible despondency of these “robbed and spoiled” people. To my mind, his words are reminiscent of the song of the Jewish partisans during the Holocaust: “Do not say, ‘This is my final path… For the day we have longed for will yet dawn…”

As part of the struggle to keep hope alive, the prophet elaborates on the idea of Mashiach (from Chapter 11 and the prophecy from the time of Achaz), the king chosen to perform justice and righteousness toward all nations. He is mentioned at the times of deepest crisis:

And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Yishai… And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him… he shall not judge by the sight of his eyes… But with righteousness shall he judge the poor… and smite the land with the rod of his mouth. (11:1-4)

Behold, My servant, whom I uphold; My elect, in whom My soul delights – I have put My spirit upon him; he shall cause judgment to go forth to the nations.

He shall not cry out, and not lift up… his voice…

A bruised reed shall he not break [through falsehood]… he shall cause judgment to go forth according to the truth…. And the isles shall wait for his teaching.” (42:1-4)

This vision of faith (entirely from the prophetic school of Yeshayahu ben Amotz) will bring the world a “new song” (42:10-12); even the wilderness will give song and flower (41:18-19), for “justice shall dwell in the wilderness” (32:16). Thus it will be possible “to bring the prisoner out of jail, and those that sit in darkness out of the prison-house” and the nation of God will be “for a covenant of the people, for a light of the nations” (42:6-7). These are the very concepts of Chapter 2 and Chapter 11, from the beginning of Yeshayahu’s prophecy.

But how will captives and prisoners believe in this future vision?

“Behold, the former [prophecies] came to pass…” (42:9) – everyone heard and saw the ascent of Assyria (and Babylonia), as prophesied, who created masses of Jewish captive and prisoners. Therefore, there is reason to also believe in the new, wondrous prophecies concerning the future:

… now I declare new things; before they spring forth, I tell you of them. (Ibid.)

**The miracle of the ingathering of the exiles – not during the Second Temple Period**

**(Chapter 43)**

The prophecy of the ingathering of exiles “from the four corners of the earth” is likewise an elaboration and expansion of previous prophecies of Yeshayahu (11:11-16; 27:12-13). It is expressed in a lyrical poetic description of the ingathering, directly from God’s mouth, as if it is taking place in front of the prophet’s eyes:

And it shall be on that day that the Lord will set His hand again a second time to recover the remnant of His people that shall remain from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Kush, and from Elam, and from Shin’ar, and from Chamat, and from the islands of the sea.

And He will set up an ensign for the nations and will assemble the dispersed of Israel, and gather together the scattered of Yehuda from the four corners of the earth. (11:11-12)

Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your seed from the east, and gather you from the west.

I will say to the north, “Give up,” and to the south, “Do not keep back; bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth.” (43:5-6)

The expansion from the earlier chapter to the later is expressed in the effort at religious persuasion (directed at those who have given up). This is the crux of the later prophecy: that at the time of the ingathering of the exiles, all the other nations will also recognize the One God, who alone rules the ends of the earth and is able to bring back His beloved nation, whom He set apart to disseminate faith in One God and “the way of the Lord, to perform justice and righteousness.”[[10]](#footnote-10) These prophecies were not written at the time of the ingathering of the exiles; there was no such phenomenon in ancient times. No one had ever seen such a thing. They were, rather, uttered and recorded in the lowly, dark period of the beginning of the exiles, just as Yirmiyahu’s great prophecies of consolation (Chapters 30-33) were uttered at the time of the Destruction (especially Chapter 32).

It is important to remember that, in fact, no ingathering of exiles took place during the time of the Second Temple, nor at any other time in history, until the Zionist enterprise of recent generations. There is no other nation that survived exile in such distant dispersion. By the same token, there will be no such ingathering anywhere, at any time, ever again. This prophecy has been unfolding in front of our eyes for almost two hundred years. Some six hundred thousand returned before the declaration of the State of Israel, followed by about four million who arrived after its establishment – most of them from the West, via the sea.

Can there possibly still be Jews in our times who do not see God’s hand in this wondrous ingathering of exiles, and who do not understand its religious significance?

Is it possible that some of them even pray three times every day, “Blessed are You, O Lord, Who gathers the dispersed of Israel?”

Is it possible that many Jews haven’t yet read and internalized the prophecies of Yeshayahu, when millions of people of faith throughout the world already recognize the One God by virtue of Yeshayahu’s prophecies?

**The struggle against idolatrous worship among the Jews**

**(Chapter 44)**

Here the prophet goes out of his way to explain who it is that he is fighting against, and why he is continually teaching the foundations of faith in One God: there are confused Jews who “do not know, nor do they understand, for their eyes are bedaubed, that they cannot see, and their hearts, that they cannot understand” (44:18) – such that they pray “to a god that cannot save” (45:20). They do not even understand how ridiculous it is to take a piece of wood, use half of it to light a fire upon which to cook, and fashion the other half into an idol for worship.

One biblical period during which we know Jews worshipped idols is the time of Menashe; this phenomenon was explained above in terms of the profound hopelessness they felt toward their own faith due to the conquests and exiles carried out by the Assyrian superpower (behind which Yeshayahu already saw, in Chapters 13-14, the rise of Chaldean Babylonia).

What were these confused Jews actually thinking? How could they be so detached from reality?

Naturally, they were having similar thoughts about the prophet himself.

The gold-plated wooden idols could be seen and venerated by the whole world, because behind them stood the might of the Assyrians and Babylonians, who had taken over half of the world. The prophet represented belief in the One God who created the world, who cannot be seen, about whom the world powers and most human beings alive knew nothing; they had no idea of His actions and power. And this prophet even believed in a future ingathering of exiles, the likes of which no one had ever seen.

So, who really seemed to be detached from reality?

Through Assyrian, Babylonian, and Chaldean eyes, the prophet’s vision and his faith were an illusion, while the golden idols represented a clear, powerful reality that everyone could see and respect. From the monotheistic perspective of Yeshayahu and his disciples, the idols of wood (and stone) represented the pinnacle of idiocy and evil, worthy of being shattered and burned.

In our world, through the Israeli eyes of the ingathered exiles, the idols of wood (and stone) are, at most, museum exhibits – monuments of an ancient stupidity. Babylonia is a heap of ruins that is the subject of archaeological study, while the eternal people (“*am* *olam*” – 44:7) has come back to life, is returning to the land of its forefathers, and is fulfilling God’s word via the prophet:

…who says of Jerusalem, “She shall be inhabited” and of the cities of Yehuda, “They shall be built, and I will raise up its ruins.” (44:26)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. A summary of this view can be found in Shalom M. Paul, *Yeshayahu Perakim* 40-66, *Mikra le-Yisrael,* introduction and commentary, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem 5768 (2 vols.). For a summary in English, which includes Chapters 34-35 in the theory, see John D.W. Watts, *World Biblical Commentary*, v. 25: Isaiah 34-66, pp. xxiii-xxv, 1987, Waco, Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Rachel Margaliot, *Echad Haya Yeshayahu* (Jerusalem, 5714), presenting dozens of expressions unique to Yeshayahu that appear both in the early part of the *sefer* (Chapters 1-39) and in the later chapters (40-66); see also Amos Chakham’s introduction to *Sefer* *Yeshayahu* in the *Da’at Mikra* series (Jerusalem 5744), vol. I, pp. 12-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more on the continuity and differences between biblical Hebrew of the First Temple Period and the Hebrew of the period of the return from Babylon and the Second Temple Period, see A. Bendavid, *Leshon Mikra u-Leshon Chakhamim* (Tel Aviv 5727), pp. 60-72. For more on the Hebrew of Yechezkel in exile and its Akkadian and ancient Aramaic influences, see R. Kasher, *Mikra le-Yisrael*: Yechezkel 1-24 (5764), pp. 82-83. Chapters 40-66 of Yishayahu show no sign of these later influences. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Chapters 40-49 are a single unit; the division into separate chapters is meaningless. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is a story I read many years ago. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Yeshayahu* 42:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This critical question became the “root of faith and the root of revolt”: the school of biblical criticism concluded on the basis of this fragment that the fundamentals of monotheistic faith were consolidated only at the time of the return from Babylonia, at the beginning of the Second Temple Period. But the Hebrew language of *Sefer* *Bereishit* is far more ancient, and these ideas and principles appear already then. It never occurred to the scholars in question that these words of the prophet were at the center of his confrontation with Jews who despaired of their ancient faith, and who had turned to idolatry. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Melakhim* II 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Bereishit* 18:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)