YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**Rav Yoel Bin-Nun**

**Shiur #25: Yeshayahu and His Disciples, From the Time of Menashe Until the Destruction (2)**

**Koresh – King Mashiach?! (Chapters 45-46)**

The rise of a savior onto the stage of history is given an extraordinary prophetic description, which indeed fits the Persian king Cyrus II:

Thus says the Lord **to His anointed one, to Cyrus**, whose right hand I have held, to subdue nations before him and to loosen the loins of kings, to open the doors before him, and that the gates may not be shut…

I am the Lord Who calls you by name; the God of Israel.

For the sake of My servant, Yaakov, and Israel, My chosen one…

In order that they may know from the rising of the sun, and from its setting in the west, that there is none besides Me; I am the LORD; and there is none else.

**I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil**; I am the LORD, that doeth all these things. (*Yeshayahu* 45:1-7)

The ancient teachings of Zoroaster, embraced as the dominant religion of Persia by the time of Cyrus II, maintained a dualistic cosmology of good and evil. Yeshayahu was familiar with these teachings and tried to convey the message that in fact, the One God alone is in charge of everything – light and goodness as well as darkness and evil. Proof of this would be revealed with the opening of “gates” before Cyrus.

Indeed, Babylonia (with the support of the priests of its temples) opened its gates to Cyrus, king of Persia. He was received as a savior in view of the prevailing anarchy: King Nabonidus had set off for the Arabian peninsula, where he spent years meditating in self-imposed exile, while the crown prince, Belshazzar, held drunken parties (*Daniel* 5:23). The kingdom was in shambles.

Cyrus, king of Persia and Media, did not accept faith in the One God. He retained his Zoroastrian beliefs – but he found a believing Jew who formulated the king’s famous declaration in the faith language (as well as the spoken language) of the Jews:

All the kingdoms of the earth has the Lord God of heaven given me, and He has charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Yehuda… (*Ezra* 1:2; *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 36:23)

The prophecy was realized precisely in accordance with the Israelite religious perspective. The opening of the gates of Babylonia to Cyrus, as well as the remembrance of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of God’s House (seventy years after its destruction), proved God’s complete mastery of all reality. The speechwriter who formulated the Hebrew preamble to the declaration understood the prophecy and the significance of Cyrus’s declaration for the Jews.

But the historical Cyrus was far from the prophetic messianic ideal.

**The collapse of world powers and faith in One God (Chapters 46-47)**

The collapse of the Babylonian gods (46:1-2) and the opening of the gates to the “eagle – from the east” (a description that suited Cyrus – 46:11) were supposed to prove the rightness and truth of faith in God’s Oneness.

One thousand and two hundred years of history would go by before the advent of Islam, when faith in “the one and only Allah” would dominate the East – but in *Sefer Yeshayahu*, the distant future is tantamount to the present.

Yeshayahu had already introduced, surprisingly, his vision of the “End of Days” in which all the nations would go up to the mountain of God to learn “Torah from Tzion” and would cease waging war – a vision that was inscribed at the entrance to the UN building in New York after two horrific world wars, thousands of years after Yeshayahu.

We also learn from *Sefer Yeshayahu* (10:5-19) that the leaders of the world powers are simply the “rod of wrath” in God’s hand. They carry out His will without meaning to, and if their intention is simply to aggrandize themselves and to follow their gods, God will eventually visit their sins and their pride upon them.

All of these ideas are familiar to us from the earlier chapters of *Yeshayahu*. Only one idea had not yet arisen in his prophecies thus far: that a king of the non-Jews, the leader of a world power, could be considered “God’s anointed,” the shepherd chosen to bring redemption to Yehuda – “to say of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built’, and of the Temple, ‘My foundation shall be laid’” (44:28) – even though his own religious world was very different.

This is the pinnacle of the universal dimension of Yeshayahu’s prophecy. In addition to the vision of the end of days (beginning of Chapter 2) and in addition to “blessed be Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance” (19:25), there is now another layer: King Mashiach can also be a great non-Jewish king, who will rebuild Jerusalem and re-establish the Temple in it.

This prophetic audacity is difficult to digest – that God’s “anointed one” does not have to be a Jew, and does not even have to believe in his own mind in the truth of the faith in One God. The historical Cyrus liberated temples and granted extensive autonomy to many nations (not only to Yehuda and Jerusalem), but went no further.

No leader or prophet at the time of Cyrus’s declaration – or afterwards, in the time of Darius (Daryavesh), who approved the building of the Sanctuary – described these great Persian kings in such messianic terms. This language is found only in Yeshayahu’s vision of the future.

With hindsight, we know and believe that the One God is always guiding history. Victors, however, see only themselves; therefore, it is specifically when a world power falls that it is easier to see God’s hand.

World War I brought the collapse of four empires that had borne European and Middle Eastern culture for hundreds of years: the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian empire, the Russian empire, and the Ottoman empire. A new world order started to arise.

World War II saw the defeat of the Nazi Haman and the toppling of the Japanese empire.

The “third world war” – the 45-year Cold War – broke the dictatorship of the Soviet Union, whose atheistic communist worldview was shattered.

The “fourth world war” – against Islamic terror (starting with 9/11) – has yet to reach its decisive conclusion.

Contrary to popular belief, in truth there were no victors in these wars. As in all of history, the lesson to be learned focuses on the forces that disintegrated. The “victors” were simply less wicked, and thus received another chance.

In the democratic world, too, the main story is not that of the “winners,” who simply receive the opportunity to prove their accomplishments, but rather the crash and failure of those who lose.

Yeshayahu celebrated the anticipated downfall of Babylonia and the revenge that would bring about its humiliation (specifically without a battle: “but I shall hurt no one” – 47:1-3) because of its cruelty towards the peoples it conquered, “My people” among them. Babylonia “showed them no mercy; upon the aged you laid your yoke very heavily” (47:6).

This cruelty is clearly seen to have arisen from the depths of the sin of arrogance:

And you said in your heart, “I am, and there is none beside me.” (*Yeshayahu* 47:10)

It is almost always arrogance that causes rulers to ignore the law of history by which God determines their fate. Indeed, the rulers of Babylonia, despite their “multitude of counsels… the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators” (ibid. 37:13), were completely blind to their imminent demise: “You said, ‘Forever shall I be mistress,’ so that you did not lay these things to your heart, nor did you remember its end” (ibid. 47:7).

**Why did God choose a stiff-necked people? (Chapters 48-49)**

God chose us from all the nations, knowing that we are “a stiff-necked people” (*Shemot* 33:5) – specifically,“because I knew that you are obstinate, and your neck is an iron sinew, and your brow brass” (*Yeshayahu* 48:4).

But why?

Had the Creator desired nothing more than endless masses singing His praises and bowing before Him in submission and obedience, there would have been no need to create man. Billions of stars throughout the cosmos declare the glory of God by simply following the same set of physical laws (“praise Him, all you stars of light” – *Tehillim* 128:3). The stones, the plants, the fish in the sea, the butterflies, “beasts and all cattle; creeping things and winged fowl” (ibid. 10) – all follow a similar impressive uniformity and conformance with the physical laws governing them.

Human beings, who have free will, can think about things. We can argue, make mistakes, act foolishly, and even commit very serious transgressions. In fact, human beings can argue with the Creator himself. Avraham and Moshe argued with God concerning His direction of the world and of His people, and did not back down. God allowed Avraham to pray for Sedom, conducting an entire legal negotiation with him over “righteousness and justice” with regard to this wicked city. This was a test of the choice of Avraham and his descendants:

For I know him [i.e., I have chosen him], that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will observe the way of God, to perform justice and righteousness. (*Bereishit* 18:19)

God accepted most of Moshe’s prayers for *Am Yisrael* (but did not accept his prayer on his own behalf – *Devarim* 3:23-27).

Only a stubborn people could produce such prophets, who debated and partnered with God in the running of His world.

But there is a dark side to this trait of stubbornness. The problem arose already at the time of the Exodus, when stubbornness showed its dark side in *Bnei Yisrael*’s lack of confidence in God’s leadership, complaints at every turn and at every moment of crisis, and even proposals of alternative gods (Egypt, golden calf, Pe’or). It appeared even more powerfully at the end of the First Temple Period when the people embraced Assyria and Babylonia (and their idols), despairing of an independent Yehuda with its faith in God (the path of Chizkiyahu and Yoshiyahu), and especially at the beginning of the exile of Israel and Yehuda.

God knows well that the Jews, “who are called by the name of Israel… who swear by the Name of the Lord…” (48:1), may adapt and feel so at home in their exile that they will not wish to leave what they know; they will be put off by the hardships and challenges of redemption. Therefore, the prophet has to warn them that just as “long ago, I declared the former things” – you never dreamed of the conquests of Assyria and Babylonia in the Holy Land, never considered the possibility of being exiled, yet “suddenly I did them, and they came to pass” (48:3) – by the same token, God is telling you in advance that Assyria and Babylonia will collapse and disappear, and then the opportunity for a historical redemption will appear. At that long-awaited moment, do not stubbornly hold onto your place in exile. Rather,

Go forth from Babylonia; free from the Chaldeans… Say, “The Lord has redeemed His servant, Yaakov.” (48:20)

Do not attach yourselves to the Chaldeans. Leave and go back to the land of Israel the moment you are able to, and follow the path of God.

**Is exile a “bill of divorce”? (Chapters 50-51)**

Yeshayahu ben Amotz established a prophetic school with its own unique language and style (“the tongue of them that are taught” – 50:4), and one of its characteristics is the “prophetic *midrash*” – i.e., prophetic passages that are midrashic teachings on the Torah. An example of this unique phenomenon is Yeshayahu’s allusion to the Scriptural unit discussing the “bill of divorce” (*Devarim* 24:1-4). (Similarly, the unit on the king in *Devarim* 17 serves as background to Chapter 2). Through this image of the bill of divorce, the prophet addresses a dark fear in the heart of the people: is their exile, then, a “bill of divorce” (50:1)? Is it possible for the “wife who was divorced” to return to her “first husband”? After all, if she sinned and pledged herself “to another man,” then “her first husband, who had sent her away, cannot take her back to be his wife” (*Devarim* 24:4).

This question regarding the relationship between God and the nation does not arise in the Torah itself, because the image used in the Torah to depict the relations between God and Israel is parental: “My firstborn son, Israel” (*Shemot* 4:22); “You are children unto the Lord your God” (*Devarim* 14:1). Children can always return to their father; parenthood never expires and is never annulled. In contrast to the imagery of the prophets (Hoshea and Yeshayahu alike), the Torah never mentions a husband and wife as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel.

The prophet’s response is adamant: God never wrote a bill of divorce for *Knesset Yisrael*, and the gates of redemption from exile are always open:

Thus says the Lord: Where is the bill of your mother’s divorce, by which I sent her away? Or which of My creditors is it to whom I have sold you [and who could produce a bill of sale]? Behold, you were sold for your iniquities, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away [and by virtue of *teshuva* you will be able to return]. (50:1)

The same metaphor appears in the prophecies of Yirmiyahu, demonstrating a certain fundamental conceptual similarity as well as significant differences from the way the image is perceived by Yeshayahu and his disciples. In the prophecies of Yirmiyahu (3:8-15), God did indeed give the “wayward” kingdom of Israel a “bill of divorce” when He sent her away from Him – but He will not hold onto His anger towards her “forever.” After Yehuda also betrays Him, He will call to the “wayward children” (of the ten tribes) to return to Him “from the land of the north.” As in the prophecy of Hoshea (Chapter 2), the redemption will come despite the bill of divorce – for a new, pure generation will arise, to which the bill of divorce does not apply.

In another example of similar images portrayed differently, God commands Yirmiyahu (with the rise of Nevukhadretzar, king of Babylonia – 25:15-29) to take the “cup of the wine of wrath” and to make all the nations drink from it, along with Jerusalem, because when the city “that is named after Me” drinks, all the kingdoms will drink. In contrast, Yeshayahu’s prophecy of consolation (*Yeshayahu* 51) declares that Jerusalem has already drunk “from God’s hand the cup of His wrath” and drained it (51:17, 22; in the Babylonian conquest). God will take from her hand “the goblet, the cup of staggering,” and she will drink no more.

Yirmiyahu uttered similar prophecies of consolation, “recorded to the book” at God’s command (30:2), and both prophets gazed at the heavens and to the earth (*Yeshayahu* 51:6), looking to the laws of the sun, moon and stars (*Yirmiyahu* 31:34-36) to ensure Jerusalem eternal deliverance.

When did Yirmiyahu utter such powerful prophecies of consolation?

These prophecies emerged before the Destruction, during the Babylonian siege, when the nation was in the depths of despair – including clear dates, which no one yet questioned.

The wake-up call to Jerusalem in *Sefer Yeshayahu* was likewise uttered at times of profound gloom, when there was a tremendous need for the prophet to mobilize every ounce of the power of faith for the purpose of survival. Here we find complete prophetic confidence in the future vision, according to which “God’s arm” will pave a way in the stormy sea (as at the splitting of the Reed Sea):

Was it not [God’s arm] that… made the depths of the sea a path for the redeemed to traverse;

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing to Tzion, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads… and sorrow and sighing will flee. (*Yeshayahu* 51:10-11)

This supreme confidence on the part of the prophet is what gave strength and hope to generations that lived in “sorrow and sighing,” helping them to hold on.

In the generation of the return from Babylonia, especially after Cyrus’s declaration, the need for such uplifting moral support was no longer as critical as it had been in the time of Menashe-Amon.

**Yeshayahu and his disciples – an encounter with the prophecy of Nachum (Chapter 52)**

It is fairly easy to place in time the prophecies of Nachum, the prophet from Elkosh (apparently in the Galilee) who foretold the destruction of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire (which was utterly destroyed at the end of the reign of Yoshiyahu – 612 B.C.E.). Nachum’s “burden of Nineveh” mentions the Assyrian conquest of No-Amon in Egypt (671 B.C.E.) as a known fact, and hence we may deduce that Nachum lived during the time of Yoshiyahu (640-609 B.C.E.) or at the end of the reign of Menashe-Amon (660-640 B.C.E.). His language and style are similar to those of Yeshayahu, and he represents further evidence – along with Mikha, Tzefania, and Chabakuk – that Yeshayahu had prophet-disciples who continued his tradition.

Indeed, there is an explicit parallel between the consolations of (the disciples of) Yeshayahu and the “burden” of Nachum:

Nachum:

Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good tidings, who announces peace! Observe your festivals, Yehuda, perform your vows, for the wicked on shall no more pass through you; he is utterly cut off. (2:1)

Yeshayahu:

How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of the messenger of good tidings, who announces peace, bringing good tidings, who announces salvation…

Hark, your watchmen life up the voice; together they sin, for they shall see, eye to eye, the Lord returning to Tzion. (52:7-8)

Nachum offers his vision of consolation for Yehuda in anticipation of the destruction of Nineveh and the fall of Assyria; (the disciples of) Yeshayahu convey the same words and the same vision concerning Tzion and Jerusalem while making mention of Egypt and Assyria. The second exile is still attributed to Assyria:

My people went down aforetime to Egypt, to sojourn there, and Assyria oppressed them without cause.

Now therefore, what do I have here [in exile], says the Lord, seeing that My people is taken away for nothing? (52:4-5)

Both prophets are describing a great vision of the return to Tzion, which was only partially realized.

The historical background to Nachum’s prophecy is almost explicit in the verse mentioning the “feet of the messenger.” It is a great festival that Yehuda is called upon to celebrate without fear of Assyria. This could only be the Pesach of Yoshiyahu (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 35), in the 18th year of his reign (622 B.C.E.). All those who still remembered the terror of Sancheriv’s campaign and his conquests in Yehuda, and the horrors of the siege of Jerusalem, would seemingly have warned King Yoshiyahu against any new “provocation” of the Assyrians.

In view of these fears, Nachum declares:

Observe your festivals, Yehuda, perform your vows, for the wicked one [the Assyrian army] shall no more pass through you; he is utterly cut off. (2:1)

In other words, there is no longer any reason to fear a campaign like Sancheriv’s; the Assyrian army has, for the most part, been “cut off,” and Nineveh will soon be utterly destroyed. Thus, we have a clear anchor for the prophecy of the burden of Nachum – and perhaps its connection to the prophecy of (the disciples of) Yeshayahu as well. However, Nachum speaks of Jerusalem celebrating in the time of Yoshiyahu, while the prophecy of (the disciples of) Yeshayahu focuses on those exiled to Assyria, who will return and rebuild Jerusalem, which will arise and shake off the dust. This vision was true before the time of Yoshiyahu and afterwards, in the time of Assyria as in the time of Babylonia, and remains valid to this day.

The consolations of (the disciples of) Yeshayahu were realized in part with the *Aliya* of Zerubavel, but there was no ingathering of exiles from all corners of the land at that time (or at any other time, other than over the past century), and the glory of God’s Presence was not manifest in the Second Temple. Nor did “the Lord bare His holy arm in the eyes of… all the ends of the earth” (52:10) as has happened in Jerusalem of our times, during the Six Day War, when the entire world stood in breathless wonder at Israel’s victory – the utterly unexpected liberation and unification of the holy city. The reality of the Second Temple was “a day of small things” (*Zekharia* 4:10) in comparison with this great prophetic vision.

Translated by Kaeren Fish