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 #31: The Reign of Yoshiyahu (3b)**

**The battle of Megiddo – the fall of Yoshiyahu (*Yirmiyahu* 4, from v. 3)**

**Evil from the south or the north?**

Between *Yirmiyahu* Chapter 3, in the period of Yoshiyahu, and Chapter 4, in the period of Yehoyakim, is a break of around 20 years. During that time, the great hope for the return of the brethren from the north was replaced by the threat of an enemy – a “destroyer of nations” – from the north (4:6-7).

During the reign of Yoshiyahu, the Assyrian kingdom was greatly weakened, while Egypt grew increasingly powerful. All eyes were turned southward. Yoshiyahu, fearing an Egyptian conquest, built defensive fortresses on the coast.[[1]](#footnote-1) When Pharaoh-Nekho moved to halt the Babylonians at the Euphrates (46:2), Yoshiyahu moved to halt *him* at Megiddo, and fell in battle[[2]](#footnote-2) (*Melakhim* II 23:29). Thus, Yoshiyahu’s entire great project came to a sudden end.

Pharaoh installed Yehoyakim in Jerusalem, against the will of the people[[3]](#footnote-3) – and behold, it seemed the evil had come from the south!

Only a few lone prophets, such as Chavakuk and Yirmiyahu, saw the situation clearly: “for I will bring evil from the *north*, and a great destruction” (*Yirmiyahu* 4:6). Had Yoshiyahu known that Pharaoh-Nekho was merely a transitory nuisance, and that the true evil would come from the north, perhaps he would not have fortified himself against Egypt, and perhaps he would not have gone to Megiddo.

This indicates the proper interpretation of the words of R. Shmuel bar Nachmani in the Gemara (*Ta’anit* 22b):[[4]](#footnote-4) “Why was Yoshiyahu punished? Because he should have consulted with Yirmiyahu, but he did not do so.” What would Yirmiyahu have told Yoshiyahu? Presumably, the same message that he conveyed to his generation and left for future generations: that Pharaoh-Nekho’s army would fall apart at the decisive battle of Karkemish, on the Euphrates; Nevukhadretzar, king of Babylonia, would prevail, and Pharaoh-Nekho would return home in defeat (*Yirmiyahu* 46:2-12).

Yehoyakim was already a servant to Pharaoh, and the prophecy of the “evil from the north” provoked heavy persecution of the prophet, including the tearing and burning of Yirmiyahu’s scroll of rebuke[[5]](#footnote-5) (36:23-29) and his almost-execution.

With the appearance of the Babylonians, “the heart of the king will fail” (*Yirmiyahu* 4:9) in shock and amazement, since it will become clear that the focus on Egypt – in terms of both fortifications (Yoshiyahu) and subjugation (Yehoyakim) – was a historic mistake.

*Chazal* count the seventy years of Babylonian domination, foretold by Yirmiyahu (25:11-12; *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 36:21), from the decisive battle at Karkemish (*Yirmiyahu* 46:2); “that was the first year of Nevukhadretzar, king of Babylonia” (25:1). This is difficult to correlate[[6]](#footnote-6) with the accepted chronology, which records 605 B.C.E. as the year of the battle of Karkemish, while the fall of Babylonia, with its surrender to Cyrus (Koresh), king of Persia, is dated to 539 B.C.E. I believe that the seventy years should be calculated from when the Babylonians, on one side, and the Egyptians, on the other, set off for the decisive battle – i.e., in 609 B.C.E., which is the year when Yoshiyahu fell at Megiddo – and lasting until Cyrus’s declaration – which came exactly 70 years later (539 B.C.E.).

Yoshiyahu’s defeat at Megiddo represents the start of the 70-year exile, since it was then that the kingdom of Yehuda lost its independence.

A second count of 70 years extends from the destruction of the Temple until the inauguration of the Second Temple (586 B.C.E. until 516 B.C.E.) in the 6th year of the reign of Darius (Daryavesh – *Ezra* 6:15), such that the calculation of the exile and Babylonian rule is not the same as the countdown from the destruction of the Temple, but each totals 70 years.

**Returning to *Tzefanya* (Chapter 3) – Which is “the city of blood”?**

Which city is it that sins, according to the prophets Nachum, Chavakuk, and Tzefanya?

In the vision of Nachum (Chapter 3), only Nineveh is a sinful “city of blood.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

In *Chavakuk* (2:5-8), it is Chaldean Babylon that sins.

Further on in *Chavakuk* (2:9-20), we start to wonder whether the prophecy is shifting to Jerusalem in the prophecies of “Woe…,” which are clearly based on Yeshayahu (5:8-22), and which Yirmiyahu (22:17-19) too uses in relation to Yehoyakim and his palace.

In Tzefanya’s prophecy (3:1-7), there is no longer any doubt; the sinning city is Jerusalem:

She did not listen to the voice, she would not receive correction; she did not trust in the Lord…

Her princes in her midst are roaring lions; her judges are wolves of the desert…

Her prophets are wanton, treacherous people, her *kohanim* have profaned that which is holy; they have done violence to the law. (3:2-4)

According to Tzefanya, God, “the Righteous One in her midst” (3:5), had deeply wanted Jerusalem to emerge vindicated, and gave her much time to observe the fate of the nations round about, so that “her dwelling would not be cut off” – but she “would not receive correction” and left God no choice but to punish her.

This description by Tzefanya would seem suited to Jerusalem prior to Yoshiyahu’s purge (just as in Chapter 1), but the same harsh message is uttered by Yirmiyahu after Yoshiyahu’s death (especially during the reign of Yehoyakim).

In any event, as in the prophecies of Yeshayahu (which are the basic model for the prophecies of Mikha, Nachum, Chavakuk, and Tzefanya), a small, faithful remnant will be left:

On that day… then I shall remove from your midst the proudly exalting ones…

And I shall leave in your midst an afflicted and poor people, and they shall take refuge in the name of the Lord.

The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies; neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth… (Ibid. vv. 11-13)

Tzefanya concludes with the ingathering of the exiles (3:14-20), using similar expressions to Mikha:

Sing, O daughter of Tzion; shout, O Israel…

The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall not fear evil any more…

I will save her that is lame, and gather her that was driven away…

For I will make you a name and a praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I return your captivity before your eyes, says the Lord.

**Prayers of the prophets**[[8]](#footnote-8)

When Avraham stands before God and argues[[9]](#footnote-9) over justice for Sedom, he is in fact engaged in prophetic prayer:

Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?...

Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked,

So that the righteous should be as the wicked. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly? (*Bereishit* 18:23-25)

How did Avraham dare to speak this way?

The answer is given explicitly in the Torah: God chose Avraham specifically so that he would be able to pray:

Shall I hide from Avraham that which I am doing? …

For I have known [chosen] him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to perform righteousness and justice…. (Ibid. vv. 17-19)

Avraham is also explicitly defined as a praying-prophet in God’s words to Avimelekh (“in a dream”):

And now, restore the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live; and if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, and all that are yours. (*Bereishit* 20:6-7)

Moshe follows the path of Avraham’s prayer-prophecy in his ongoing argument with God (beginning with the encounter at the burning bush) – which is precisely the purpose for which God chose him. Moshe prays for *Am Yisrael* (as well as for Pharaoh and Egypt), and God always accedes to his prayer. It is only when he prays for himself that God responds (*Devarim* 3:26),

Let it suffice you; speak no more to Me of this matter. Go up to the top of Pisgah…

Later prophets, such as Amos (7:1-6), continued to utter prayer-prophecies, and God heard and accepted their prayers – until He told Yirmiyahu to stop praying. Yirmiyahu stubbornly continued, and God rejected his prayers again and again (*Yirmiyahu* 14:11; 15:1; 32:16-27). A barrier descended into the world, and to this day we pray before that barrier. The direct, prophetic prayer that dares to argue with God – and which God desires – began with Avraham and ended with Yirmiyahu.

Just before Yirmiyahu, Chavakuk offered his own prophetic prayer over God’s management of the world, in view of the Chaldean ascent – “A prayer of Chavakuk the prophet” (3:1).

The prophet retreats from his earlier protest against God’s management of the world, into a prophetic prayer calling upon God to again reveal His mighty hand in the world, as He did at the time of the Exodus, and to save His people with the Divine attribute of mercy (like the prayer of Moshe):

O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember compassion. (3:2)

In the First Temple Period, God’s revelation is described as a nomadic presence with *Am Yisrael*, as at Sinai, but from the south – from Mount Paran, and from the land of Midian – just as depicted in the song of blessing uttered by Moshe:

The Lord came from Sinai, and rose from Se’ir to them; He shone forth from Mount Paran, and He came from the myriads of holiness; at His right hand was a fiery law for them. (*Devarim* 33:2)

Chavakuk echoes this imagery:

God comes from Teiman [the south], and the Holy One from Mount Paran, selah... (3:3)

Descriptions of God’s revelation and His deliverance as a wandering presence can also be found in the song of Devora (*Shoftim* 5:4-5) and in *Tehillim* (68:8-9). Chavakuk’s prayer is very similar to several specific psalms (66; 77; 78; 80) that cry out for deliverance as at the time of the Exodus.

Regarding the time of the Second Temple (3:8-13), there are descriptions of the crossing of God’s hosts at “Naharayim” (rivers) and “in the sea,” and of His deliverance as shown to Yehoshua during his conquest of the land:

[He] lifts its [His] hands on high.

The sun and moon stand still in their habitation…

You march through the earth in indignation; You thresh the nations in anger.

You come forth for the deliverance of Your people, for the deliverance of Your anointed one… (Ibid. vv. 10-13)

When it comes to the Third Temple (3:14-19), Chavakuk speaks of the war of deliverance that he yearns to hear about, when God’s hosts will pass through “mighty waters” and strike the forces of evil that “come as a whirlwind to scatter me,” whose “rejoicing is as to devour the poor secretly.” In view of the deliverance that the prophet prays for, he concludes by offering a song of praise in advance:

I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exalt in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength; He makes my feet like hinds, and causes me to walk upon my high places [i.e., grant me dominion]… (Ibid. vv. 18-19)

Victories of this sort were realized only in the wars of the Chashmonaim, and in the wars of the modern State of Israel.

**Appendix**

**Rav Kook’s eulogy for Herzl: Achav and Yoshiyahu; “eulogy in Jerusalem”**[[10]](#footnote-10)

Perhaps the only Jewish leader whose vision reflected an understanding of the Zionist aspiration to combine “two branches” – Judaism and Israeliness – into a single “branch” was Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook. In the speech he delivered at a memorial service for Theodor (Binyamin Ze’ev) Herzl entitled, “The Eulogy in Jerusalem,” about a month after his arrival in Eretz Yisrael, he said the following:[[11]](#footnote-11)

The entire concept of two Messiahs – Mashiach ben Yosef and Mashiach ben David – requires explanation. Why the need for two Messiahs, when the goal is to have one leader preside over the entire nation? As it says, “And David My servant shall be prince unto them forever.” However, God created in man a body and a soul, and corresponding to them, forces that strengthen and develop the body as well as forces that strengthen and cultivate the soul. Ultimate wholeness is achieved when the body is strong and well developed, and the soul, vital and cultivated, leads all the faculties of the body in the service of the intellect, which is God’s will in His world. Likewise on the collective level of Israel, God ordained these two forces: one that corresponds to the individual’s physical entity, that aspires to the nation’s material improvement, which is the proper basis for all the great holy plans by which Israel is distinguished as a holy nation to God… a “light unto the nations” [*Yeshayahu* 42:6]; and the other, devoted to the cultivation of spirituality. By virtue of the first aspect, Israel is comparable to all the nations of the world. It is by dint of the second aspect that Israel is unique, as it says: “The Lord leads it (Israel) alone” [*Devarim* 32:12]; “Among the nations it (Israel) shall not be reckoned” [*Bamidbar* 23:9]. It is the Torah and unique sanctity of Israel that distinguish it from the nations.

Originally, these two faculties were assigned to the two tribes destined to rule Israel, Efraim and Yehuda….

The quality of love of nation in a material sense was exemplified by Achav, who loved Am Israel greatly. He followed in the ways of his father Omri, who added a city to Israel [see *Sanhedrin* 102b] …. It is taught that he kept up appearances in war even when pierced through by an arrow [*Melakhim* I 22:35], so that his troops would not be demoralized. Such courage comes from a wonderful love. He also showed honor to the Torah before Ben-Hadad [by not allowing him to take “all that is desirable in your eyes” – *Melakhim* I 20:6-9], since it is at the very least the foundation of the nation’s outward-facing honor… Nevertheless, he did not comprehend the value of Torah and its unique divine sanctity which uplifts Israel. Thus, he followed in the ways of Izevel and the abominable rites practiced by the contemporary nations.

At the other end, Yoshiyahu strengthened the spiritual dimension. In this respect, he was unequaled among kings, as the text testifies: “Before him there was no king who so returned to the Lord with all his heart, soul, and might…” [*Melakhim* II 23:25]. He wanted no possibility of linking of Israel to the nations, and therefore refused Jeremiah’s prophetic demand that he allow the army of Egypt to enter Israel’s territory. Thus, Achav and Yoshiyahu [both of whom fell in battle] represent the two forces of Yosef and Yehuda – or Mashiach ben Yosef and Mashiach ben David…

The Zionist vision of our own times represents the “footsteps of Mashiach ben Yosef,” tending towards the general, universal aspect [of nationhood]… It is unequipped to realize that the development of Israel’s general aspect is but the foundation for Israel’s singularity. The leadership of the Zionist movement must be greatly influenced by the gifted few of the generation, the righteous and the sages of Israel. On the other hand, [it must be] realized that the ideal of Israel’s national renascence, including all the material accouterment, is a proper thing when joined to the spiritual goal. The separation [of these two aspects in the Zionist movement] has thus far prevented its success, and the lack of success has brought on infighting, until finally, the leader of the movement has fallen, a victim of frustration and anguish. It behooves us to take to heart, to try to unify the “branch of Yosef” and the “branch of Yehuda”; to rejoice in the healthy, human national reawakening, and to know that this is not the end goal of Israel, but only a preparation….

According to Rav Kook’s vision, the most important goal is the joining of the two forces – “Israeli” and “Jewish.” This is the vision of the two “branches.” However, Rav Kook goes further, interpreting the words of the prophet Zekharia about the “eulogy in Jerusalem” (*Zekharia* 12:10-12) in accordance with the marvelous translation[[12]](#footnote-12) of Yonatan ben Uziel, who detects a double eulogy, over two great kings who died in battle: Achav, who fell at Ramot Gil’ad, and Yoshiyahu, who fell at Megiddo. These two figures represent the two opposite poles, the “branch of Yosef” and the “branch of Yehuda” – the Israelite identity and the Jewish identity. Rav Kook perceived that neither of these forces would succeed on its own – neither Achav alone nor Yoshiyahu alone. Only their unification could be the basis for the success of the initiative of the return to the land and the State of Israel.

If we consider these two figures, Achav and Yoshiyahu, we see that they are truly opposites. Achav forged an alliance with Sidon (Tzidon) and married Izevel, who was from there (*Melakhim* I 16:31-33). She introduced the worship of Ba’al and Ashera into Israel, along with the spilling of much innocent blood (the prophets of God who opposed the regime – *Melakhim* I 18:13; Navot of Yizre’el – 21:6 onward), drawing Achav after her to the extent that even after the miraculous events at Mount Carmel, Izevel was able to resume her control of him (*Melakhim* I 19:1-2).

No matter what we have to say about secular culture in Israel, it comes nowhere near the abominations of Achav and Izevel (as I was told many years ago by Rav Tzvi Yehuda Ha-Kohen Kook – the son of Rav Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Kohen Kook), and indeed, *Chazal* count Achav as one of the few individuals who have no place in the World to Come (Mishna *Sanhedrin*, “*Perek* *Chelek*,” *mishna* 2). How, then, could Rav Kook find it within himself to advocate for Achav (in accordance with the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* 102b; 104b)? It was because Achav loved *Am Yisrael* and Eretz Yisrael, and he built it up, continuing the work of his father, Omri. He also gave honor to the Torah, refusing to give the Torah into the hand of the enemy. He sacrificed his life in battle, and asked that he be placed in a chariot facing the enemy, after he was injured and bleeding, so as to keep the spirits of the soldiers up (*Melakhim* I 22:35).

On the other hand, we have Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda, the greatest among the *ba’alei* *teshuva* of all time, as the text asserts (*Melakhim* II 22-23). He brought Yehuda back to the *sefer* *Torah*, and purged the entire country of idolatry, with all his might – and he also fell in battle, against Pharaoh-Nekho. All the Jewish spiritual leaders who think that the Zionist State of Israel is simply a transitory stage on the way to a “messianic redemption” that will be “in accordance with Torah” have to deal with the question of Yoshiyahu’s fall at Megiddo and *Chazal*’s explanation of the great secret that Yonatan ben Uziel revealed – that the “eulogy in Jerusalem” is in fact a dual eulogy. Only Rav Kook, in his profound and expansive vision, saw that each of these two forces on its own would be insufficient, because neither Israelite nationality alone nor Jewish religious identity alone could support the redemption, despite the great measure of self-sacrifice on each side. Only the unification of the two branches into one could provide a proper, worthy basis for the redemption of Israel. Indeed, this is also the vision of Israel’s Declaration of Independence, and the secret of the power of the Jewish-Israeli identity that is being molded in Israel, in all the convolutions of agreements and disagreements between these two branches that are interwoven and interconnected.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Some of these have been found; one was discovered on Palmachim beach (the same area where the Yavneh-Yam ostracon, discussed in a previous *shiur*, was found), and another in the region of the seaside hotels in Tel Aviv. Shalom Zemirin’s work, *Yoshiyahu u-Tekufato* (Jerusalem, 5737), offers the best description of Yoshiyahu’s policy – which was never “pro-Babylonian,” but rather tried to address the danger presented by Pharaoh-Nekho of Egypt. Zemirin, a member of Kibbutz Degania, fell in the War of Independence defending the kibbutz against attack by Syrian tanks. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to the description in *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 35:21-23, Pharaoh-Nekho tried to prevent the battle by claiming that he was “merely” passing through in order to wage war against the Babylonians on the Euphrates, but Yoshiyahu was determined to fight, and was shot in his chariot. The description is very similar to the account of Achav’s fall in Ramot Gil’ad (*Melakhim* I 22:30-35); see below in the Appendix.

The account in *Melakhim* (II 23:29) is very brief; it may well be that Pharaoh-Nekho’s forces created an Egyptian diversion, pretending Pharaoh-Nekho wanted to meet him (Yoshiyahu), while in fact Pharaoh’s army surprised Yoshiyahu – similar to the diversionary tactics of Pharaoh Thutmose III in the same area (the Iron – Megiddo passage) around 870 years prior to the time of Yoshiyahu (according to the accepted chronology, 1479 B.C.E / 609 B.C.E.). See *Historia Tzeva’it shel Eretz Yisrael bi-Yemei ha-Mikra* (Tel Aviv 5724), pp. 17-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Upon Yoshiyahu’s death, “the people of the land” chose as their king the younger Yehoachaz (*Melakhim* II 23:30-33), but this attempt held out for only three months. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. According to the discussion in the Gemara, Pharaoh-Nekho’s campaign was a “sword of peace,” based on his words as quoted in *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 35:21 – “What have I to do with you, O king of Yehuda? I do not come against you this day, but against the house with which I have war” – and Yoshiyahu’s generation was not worthy of halting a “sword of peace.” The answer we might offer to this explanation is that if Pharaoh Nekho had emerged victorious against the Babylonians, the Assyrians would have handed him control of Eretz Yisrael; therefore, it was important to halt his move northward – and this is proven by the coronation of Yehoyakim by Pharaoh Nekho. Yirmiyahu offers a different explanation: Pharaoh Nekho would be defeated, and hence there was no need and no point in going out to wage war against him. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The content of this scroll will be explained at length in the second part of the series. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Chazal*’s assumption in *Seder Olam* that the seventy years of Babylonian rule in the world start from the first year of Nevukhadretzar’s reign as king of Babylonia (605 B.C.E.) is based on *Yirmiyahu* (25:11-12) and on *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 36:21; see Rashi’s explicit summary in his commentary on *Ezra* 1:1. This calculation counts 52 years from then until the first year of Cyrus (Koresh – 539 B.C.E., according to historical research), leaving four years missing. However, the year of Yoshiyahu’s death at Megiddo (609 B.C.E.) also marked the beginning of the battle at Karkemish (*Yirmiyahu* 46:2), where Nevukhadretzar led the army (even during the reign of his father) and was victorious. It is easy to see that the prophecy calculates the seventy years of Babylonia from the beginning of that war, and not from its end; these are the four missing years. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See previous *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For further elaboration see “*Nevuat ha-Tefila shel Avraham*” in my book *Pirkei Avot be-Sefer Bereishit*, pp. 72-99, and also *Ha-Makor ha-Kaful – Hashraah ve-Samkhut be-Mishnat ha-Rav Kook*, pp. 119-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The word *tefilla* (prayer) is derived from the root *p-l-l*, meaning legal questioning and clarification, not supplication. Indeed, Avraham launches into supplication (“I am dust and ashes…”) only after he has exhausted the possibilities of direct prophetic prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. From my book, *Nes Kibbutz Galuyot* (Tel Aviv, 5771), pp. 294-297. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The eulogy was published in *Ma'amarei ha-Ra'aya* I, pp.94-99. Its source is in *Kovetz Ha-rishon Le-Yaffo*, Jerusalem 5766, 109-116. The translation here is primarily that found at <https://www.machonso.org/mishol/item.asp?id=1037#_ftnref6>, with some changes. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Chazal* themselves marvel over it – see *Bavli Megilla* 3a. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)