YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**PARASHAT BO**

**The Fall of Egypt**

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**In memory of Irit bat Yitele *z"l*
whose *yahrzeit* is 6 Shevat
by Family Rueff**

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**Dedicated in memory of Miriam Heller *z"l*
whose *yahrzeit* falls on the seventh of Shevat,
by her niece, Vivian Singer.**

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The word that the Lord spoke to Yirmeyahu the prophet – how Nevukhadretzar, king of Babylon, would come to attack the land of Egypt: Tell it in Egypt, let it be heard in Migdol, and let it be heard in Nof and in Tachpanches! Say, "Stand firm and prepare yourself, for the sword has devoured your surroundings." Why have your warriors been swept away? They did not stand because the Lord pushed them down. He made many falter. Each man fell upon his comrade and said, "Get up and let us return to our people and to the land of our birth, away from the sword of the oppressor." There they will taunt: "Pharaoh, king of Egypt, king over a multitude, allowed the appointed time to go by." As I live – declares the King, Lord of Hosts is His name – just as Tabor is among the mountains, and Carmel is by the sea, so will he come. Make for yourselves baggage for exile, you who dwell securely, daughter Egypt, for Nof will become a desolation, laid waste, with no inhabitant. A very beautiful calf was Egypt, but a murderous enemy attacks her from the north. Even her hired soldiers within her army are like fattened calves. They too shall turn away, flee together, and not stand firm. Their day of doom has arrived, when they will meet their fate. Her voice will go forth like a snake's, for they will attack her with force and come upon her with axes like woodcutters. They shall cut down her forest, declares the Lord, although it cannot be fathomed. There are more of them than locusts; they are innumerable. Shamed is daughter Egypt, given over into the hands of the northern people. Said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, I will inflict punishment upon Amon of No, and upon Pharaoh, and upon Egypt, upon her gods and upon her kings, upon Pharaoh and all who trust in him. I will give them over into the hands of those who seek their lives and into the hands of Nevukhadretzar, king of Babylon, and into the hands of his servants. Afterward, she shall be inhabited as in days of old, declares the Lord. As for you, My servant Yaakov, do not fear, and Israel, do not be terrified, for I will deliver you from a distant land and your descendants from their land of captivity. For Yaakov it will again be quiet and tranquil, with none to frighten him. And you, My servant Yaakov, do not fear, declares the Lord, for I am with you. For I will make an end of all the nations among whom I have scattered you, but of you I will not make an end. I will discipline you justly, but I will surely not annihilate you. (*Yirmeyahu* 46:13-28)

**I. The Connection Between the *Parasha* and the *Haftara***

The *haftara* for *Parashat Bo* continues along the lines of the *haftara* for *Parashat Vaera* – a prophecy regarding the calamity that will strike the land of Egypt, following on the plagues described in the Torah. It is a bit puzzling to me why a prophecy dealing with the Paschal offering or one that praises the exodus from Egypt was not chosen; there are many that fall into those categories, and it would seem to be an appropriate theme for *Parashat Bo*. Admittedly, a hint to the redemption following the plagues of Egypt can be found towards the end of our *haftara*:

As for you, My servant Yaakov, do not fear, and Israel, do not be terrified, for I will deliver you from a distant land and your descendants from their land of captivity. For Yaakov it will again be quiet and tranquil, with none to frighten him.

**II. The Literary-Prophetic Background; Calamity Comes to the Nations**

The book of *Yirmeyahu* is divided into several sub-books, the last of which consists of Yirmeyahu's prophecies to the non-Jewish nations (chapters 46-51). Our chapter opens these prophecies with:

This came to Yirmeyahu the prophet as the word of the Lord concerning the nations. (*Yirmeyahu* 46:1)

Another part of the book even refers to this book, which reflects a careful editing of the book of *Yirmeyahu*, perhaps by his disciple Barukh son of Nerya:

I will bring upon that land all that I have spoken against her, all that is written in this book, which was prophesied by Yirmeyahu concerning all the nations. (*Yirmeyahu* 25:13)

There we also find the prophetic reason for writing a book about the calamities that will befall the nations. This is a prophecy of the cup of the wine of wrath, the intoxicating and tasteless wine that Yirmeyahu is commanded to give the nations to drink:

I am about to send for My servant Nevukhadretzar, king of Babylon, and I shall take all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and bring them upon this land, upon its inhabitants, and upon all these nations surrounding them. I will destroy them and make of them a wasteland and a place of shrieking, an eternal ruin. I shall abolish from them the sound of joy and the sound of happiness, the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the mill and the light of the lamp. The entire land shall become a ruin and a wasteland, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. When these seventy years are completed, I will visit retribution upon the king of Babylon and that nation, declares the Lord, for their sin, and as for the land of the Chaldeans, I shall make it an eternal wasteland. (*Yirmeyahu* 25:9-12)

Yirmeyahu gives the cup of the wine of wrath to no fewer than twenty-six nations (and in fact, many more, because some of the nations mentioned in the prophecy include several tribes – "the kings of Zimri," "the kings of Arabia," etc.) that will fall before Nevukhadnetzar, the first of which are Yehuda and Egypt. He spells out the calamity to come:

Should they refuse to take the cup from your hand to drink, say to them: This is what the Lord of Hosts said: You must drink! For I am about to bring evil upon the city that is called by My name, and you expect to be absolved? You will not be absolved, for I summon a sword to fall upon all the inhabitants of the land, declares the Lord of Hosts. (*Yirmeyahu* 25:28-29)

From the prophetic perspective, Nevuchadnetzar arose to subdue the rebellious kingdom of Yehuda and bring it to its punishment. But there is a glaring deficiency in this justice: despite the sins of the people of Israel, the surrounding nations are much worse, and if only the people of Israel are punished, and everyone else continues to dwell in peace, the attribute of justice will suffer. The resultant desecration of God's name if only His nation is punished may stain the entire creation. Therefore, when God descends to punish His people, He punishes all the nations.

As mentioned, the book of prophecies relating to the non-Jewish nations describes the calamities to befall the surrounding nations (as well as the consolation that will follow), calamities to come primarily by way of Nevukhadnetzar, who is referred to here as "the servant of God" because it is he who carries out God's will.

**III. The Historical Background to Our Prophecy**

The background to the prophecy of calamity to befall Egypt is mentioned at the beginning of our chapter, before the part we read in the *haftara*:

Of Egypt, concerning the army of Pharaoh Nekho, king of Egypt, located at the Euphrates River near Karkemish and which Nevukhadretzar, king of Babylon, attacked during the fourth year of Yehoyakim son of Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda. (*Yirmeyahu* 46:2)

During the days of Yoshiyahu, a conflict developed between Babylon and Media, the two new powers that rose in the east, and Assyria, in the course of which several Assyrian cites fell to the Babylonians: Ashur (in year 25 of Yoshiyahu), Nineveh (in year 27 of Yoshiyahu), and Charan (in year 30 of Yoshiyahu). Beginning in year 23 of Yoshiyahu, Egypt sent reinforcements to help the crumbling Assyrian kingdom. The armies of Pharaoh Psamtik, king of Egypt, were defeated in the battle of Charan, and they retreated from Charan to the west bank of the Euphrates River because of the army of Nabopolossar, king of Babylon.

In the thirty-first year of Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda, the last year of his reign, Pharaoh Nekho, who came to power in Egypt that year, set out to help Ashur-Uballit, king of Assyria – and our prophecy refers to this journey. On his way north, Pharaoh Nekho killed Yoshiyahu, who had gone to stop him at Megiddo. He and his army reached Charan, the new capital of Assyria after the destruction of Nineveh. The main part of his army camped in Karkemish, a considerable distance west of Charan, and he himself returned to his headquarters in Ribla in Syria. About four years later, the decisive battle took place between Pharaoh Nekho's army and the Babylonian army, which was commanded by Nevukhadnetzar on behalf of his father, Nabopolassar, king of Babylon. In the battle at Karkemish on the Euphrates, Nevukhadnetzar dealt a fatal blow to the Egyptian army, and Pharaoh returned with the remnants of his army to Egypt. All the lands that had been under his rule, from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates, including the kingdom of Yehuda, passed to Babylon, to Nevukhadnetzar. This took place eighteen years before the destruction, at which time Yirmeyahu delivered the prophecy of our *haftara*, foretelling that Nevukhadnetzar would also strike Egypt itself.

In fact, about four years later, in the eighth year of Yehoyakim, Nevukhadnetzar led his army in a great military campaign to Egypt; it is possible that it was to this campaign that the prophet was referring in our chapter.

According to what we know from external sources, however, the Babylonian campaign was not entirely successful, and both Egypt and Babylon suffered heavy losses. Nevukhadnetzar's army retraced its steps to Babylon to reorganize, and the fall of Egypt was postponed for quite a few years.

**IV. Several Comments on the Prophecy in our Haftara**

*The cities of Egypt:*

The prophecy deals with the downfall of several Egyptian cities:

Migdol – situated near the north of the Gulf of Suez, south of the Great Bitter Lake, on the Sinai border.

Nof – situated west of Migdol, on the Nile, a little south of the delta fork.

Tachpanches – close to the coast of the Mediterranean Sea where it meets the eastern delta.

Amon of No – located in southern Egypt (Upper Egypt), also on the Nile, but far from the northern cities. It is mentioned only at the end of the prophecy, and the prophet foretells that the king of Babylon will also reach it.

*The meaning of the verses:*

a. "He made many falter. Each man fell upon his comrade and said, 'Get up and let us return to our people and to the land of our birth, away from the sword of the oppressor'" (46:16).

This verse describes the Egyptian army fleeing from the north to Egypt. In their speed, they run into and fall one on top of the other. "The sword of the oppressor" – the sword that destroys, the sword of the Chaldeans.

b. "There they will taunt [*kar’u*]: 'Pharaoh, king of Egypt, king over a multitude (*be-sha'on*), allowed the appointed time to go by'" (v.17).

In my opinion, the verse means: The soldiers will cry out loudly (*be-sha'on*) that Pharaoh missed the chance to refortify himself in Egypt, and the sword of the Chaldeans will continue to pursue him inside Egypt.

c. "A very beautiful calf was Egypt, but a murderous enemy attacks her from the north. Even her hired soldiers within her army are like fattened calves. They too shall turn away, flee together, and not stand firm. Their day of doom has arrived, when they will meet their fate" (v.20).

The rich kingdom of Egypt had a large mercenary army (mainly Greek warriors), and they too will be slaughtered by the Chaldeans. Egypt, which is likened to a beautiful calf, and its mercenaries, whom the prophet compares to fattened calves, will be led to the slaughterhouse and slaughtered. The slaughter – "the murderous enemy" – will come from the north, from Babylon.

d. "Her voice will go forth like a snake's, for they will attack her with force and come upon her with axes like woodcutters. They shall cut down her forest, declares the Lord, although it cannot be fathomed. There are more of them than locusts; they are innumerable" (v.22).

The loud voice of Egypt, which the prophet had previously referred to with the term "*sha'on*," will now resemble the whisper of a snake. Her enemies will resemble woodcutters cutting down the Egyptian forest – the great army of Egypt. The Chaldean soldiers who will attack Egypt have no number – they are more numerous than locusts, and, from our perspective, the blow that they will inflict upon Egypt goes back to the first event in our *parasha* – the original plague of locusts that befell Egypt.

(Translated by David Strauss)