

SEFER DANIEL
By Rav Yaakov Medan

Shiur #05: Chapter 3 (Part III)

5. The Conversation between God and Nevukhadnetzar

God, in His mercy towards all His creatures as well as Judge of the entire world, certainly has an interest in the fate of the royal butler and the royal baker and unquestionably has an interest in saving the whole of Egypt from starvation. However, the impression we have when reading these chapters in *Sefer Bereishit* is that the figure of Yosef looms larger than the dreams. Beyond God's hidden intentions as to the fate of the Egyptians, it seems that the text of the story of Yosef projects a different message – the same message that would be stated much later by the prophet Tzefania:

I have cut off nations, their corners are desolate; I have laid their streets waste with none passing through; their cities are destroyed with no man, with no inhabitant. I said, "Surely you will fear Me and receive correction..."
(*Tzefania* 3:6-7)

Here, the prophet views the events in the world from a single, narrow perspective: the lesson that God is trying to teach His nation, Israel.

In the final chapters of *Sefer Bereishit*, it seems that the fate of Pharaoh, his ministers, and his people is simply the background for the realization of Yosef's dreams, his ascent to greatness, and the move to Egypt by the tribes of Israel, in a new structure under Yosef's authority.

In Daniel's story, however, the emphasis is different. Following Nevukhadnetzar's first dream, aside from the interpretation itself, there is also a change in the status of Daniel and his companions. However, in the next dream, in chapter 4, the text gives no hint of any change for Daniel, who interprets it. Even the change in his status in our chapter appears to herald no fateful change for *Am Yisrael* as a whole – or at least none that is mentioned explicitly in the text. While Pharaoh serves as a mere background to Yosef's ascent, in our text, Nevukhadnetzar seems to be the aim, not the means. This raises the question: Why does God devote such personal attention to Nevukhadnetzar, and why does He reveal His plans in the dream that He sends him?

Let us consider the following excerpt from Yirmiyahu:

At the beginning of the reign of Yehoyakim, son of Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda, this word came to Yirmiyahu from God, saying: So says God to me: Make for yourself bands and bars, and place them upon your neck. And send them to the king of Edom and to the king of Moav and to the king of the children of Amon, and to the king of Tzor and to the king of Tzidon, by the hand of the messengers who come to Jerusalem, to Tzidkiyahu, king of Yehuda. And command them to convey to their masters, saying: So says the Lord of Hosts, God of Israel: So shall you say to your masters: I made the earth, man, and the beasts upon the face of the earth, by My great power and by My outstretched arm; and I have given it to whoever is deserving in My eyes. And now I have given all of these lands into the hand of Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, My servant,^[1] and I have also given him the beasts of the field, to serve him. And all the nations shall serve him, and his son, and his son's son, until the time of his own land likewise arrives; then many nations and great kings will make him their servant. And it shall be that the nation and the kingdom which do not serve him – Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon – and do not place their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will visit that nation with the sword and with famine and with pestilence, says God, until I have consumed them by his hand. But as for you – do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreams, your soothsayers and your sorcerers, to speak to you, saying: You shall not serve the king of Babylon. For they are prophesizing a lie to you, to remove you far from your land, and so that I should drive you out and you should perish. But the nation that brings its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serves him – I shall leave [that nation] upon its land, says God, and they shall till it and dwell in it. And I have spoken to Tzidkiyahu, king of Yehuda, of all these things, saying: Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, that you may live. (*Yirmiyahu* 27:1-12)

Nevukhadnetzar is not only the king of kings; he is also a servant of God. God has decided, of His own sovereign will, to place Nevukhadnetzar over the entire world, and has commanded all the nations to serve him. Perhaps God's intention here is, as in other places, to tell *Am Yisrael* that they are never free to do as they wish. Just as at the time of the Exodus from Egypt they had to choose between accepting the yoke of Pharaoh's kingship and accepting the yoke of God's Kingship, at the end of the First Temple period, they had to choose between the yoke of God's Kingship and the yoke of Nevukhadnetzar. By rejecting God's yoke, they took upon themselves, albeit unwillingly, the yoke of the Babylonian king.

However, Nevukhadnetzar is completely unaware of his selection as the rod of God's wrath – just as the king of Assyria, who preceded him, and the king of Persia, who succeeded him, were unaware of their Divinely ordained historical role.^[2] He is convinced that it is his own power, and that of his gods, which have elevated him to greatness. He is also happily deluding himself that his kingdom will last forever.

When God is hiding His face from *Am Yisrael*, there is a possibility of the situation being misunderstood as a reflection of weakness. The song

of *Ha'azinu* addresses this argument: "Were it not for the stored-up wrath of the enemy, lest their adversaries should misinterpret [the situation], saying: Our hand is high; it is not God Who has done all of this" (*Devarim* 32:27). It is therefore important that Nevukhadnetzar is presented as God's servant and as acting in His service, and he himself must also acknowledge this in public.

Here, apparently immediately after Nevukhadnetzar has destroyed God's House and His holy city,^[3] God informs him that he is simply a layer in the construction of the future Divine Kingdom, and that he is a servant of God – either willingly or unwillingly. God did not reveal this message to the king of Assyria, nor to any other king known to us, because none of them attained the greatness of Nevukhadnetzar and the degree of his attendant illusion of being king of the world and omnipotent. No other king set his sights on the Temple and holy city of the King of kings. From this perspective, Daniel is not the aim, but rather the means and the messenger charged with bringing God's word to the king of Babylon, paralleling the role of all the prophets of Israel.

Is there any use in interpreting a dream and conveying God's word to a proud mortal king who possesses everything? Apparently there is. More than once, Nevukhadnetzar arrives as the correct religious conclusion – and even publicizes it, as we shall see later on. More than once, he turns himself into a willing servant of God. We must therefore take a step further and ask whether this served any purpose other than the relations between God and Nevukhadnetzar and the sanctification of the Name of God in the eyes of the nations. The answer here, once again, is in the affirmative:

And God's word came to me, saying: So says the Lord God of Israel: Like these good figs, so will I regard the captivity of Yehuda, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans, for [their] good. And I will set My eyes upon them for good, and bring them back to this land, and I will build them up and not pull them down, and I will plant them and not pluck them up. And I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord, and they will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with all their heart. (*Yirmiyahu* 24:4-7)

It seems that there are solid grounds for assuming that Nevukhadnetzar's positive attitude towards the exiles of Yehoyakhin, who found themselves under his rule, may have had something to do with the king's fear of the Lord God of Israel, following the lessons learned from his two dreams and from the episode of the fiery furnace in the valley of Dura. This positive attitude also has something to do with the respected status of Daniel, Chanania, Mishael, and Azaria in the wake of God's revelation of His secrets to Daniel and his ability to interpret the meaning of Nevukhadnetzar's dream. As individuals of status and standing in the eyes of the king, they were able to advocate on behalf of their people, like Mordekhai, who rose to his lofty position later on.

6. Why did Nevukhadnetzar Forget the Dream?

At this point a new question arises: If God wanted to communicate with Nevukhadnetzar and to reveal His thoughts to him, why did He cause Nevukhadnetzar to forget the dream, such that he needed Daniel to remind him of it and to interpret it for him? While the study of the psychology of dreams may suggest that this was significant, and while Daniel – and his people – benefited from his involvement in the episode of the dream, these reasons are not sufficient to explain why God chose this manner in which to reveal the meaning of the dream to Nevukhadnetzar.

We must keep in mind that despite all of Nevukhadnetzar's importance as the revealed ruler of the world, he was a base individual^[4] who, aside from a few moments in which he praised the God of the heavens, engaged in idolatry, sexual immorality, and bloodshed almost without limit. God does not communicate directly with such a person, not even through a dream. Nevukhadnetzar dreams – but he forgets his dream, and cannot make sense of it. He can understand God's word only through His speaking, in hidden ways, with Daniel.

An example of this sort of situation is to be found in God's word to Eli on the eve of the destruction of Shilo:

God said to Shemuel: Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both ears will tingle for everyone who hears it. On that day I will perform against Eli all that I have spoken about his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I will judge his house forever, for the iniquity of knowing what his sons were bringing a curse upon themselves, but not rebuking them. Therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the sin of Eli's house will not be atoned for through sacrifice and offering, forever. (*Shemuel I* 3:11-14)

The message is essentially directed at Eli and not at Shemuel – who, at this stage, is not even yet a prophet. Therefore, only Eli understands that it is God Who calls to the boy, and that it is He Who foretells this punishment. Had Shemuel been a prophet, he could not have mistaken God's voice for a human voice.^[5] Only Eli understood that this was a prophecy, and therefore made Shmuel swear to reveal its content to him. The prophecy was conveyed to Eli, but it was not conveyed to him directly, because owing to his sins and the sins of his sons, God did not wish to communicate with him directly.^[6]

7. Daniel's Prayer of Thanksgiving

Let us add a few words about Daniel's prayer of thanksgiving for God having revealed to him the secret of Nevukhadnetzar's dream:

Then the secret was revealed to Daniel in a night vision, whereupon Daniel blessed the God of heaven. Daniel answered and he said, "May the Name of God, to Whom wisdom and valor belong, be blessed forever and ever. He changes the seasons and the times, removes kings and elevates kings, gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who know insight. He reveals deep and hidden things, knowing that which is in darkness, while light dwells with Him.

I thank and give praise to You, God of my fathers, Who has given me wisdom and might, and now You have revealed to me that which we asked of You, making the king's matter known to us." (2:19-23)

Daniel's praise and thanks to God addresses two matters. First, there is the content of the dream (which we will discuss in the next *shiur*): Daniel gives thanks for the knowledge that Nevukhadnetzar's day will come and that God will remove this adversary from his seat of power. He also praises God because the fact that God removes one king and raises up another proves that He is the true King, and that mortal kings are nothing but His instruments. He compares their transient reign to the way in which God changes the seasons and the times. This is the basis for the first blessing before the *Shema* recited every evening:

With understanding changes the seasons and exchanges the times... creating day and night, rolling back the light before the darkness, and the darkness before the light, and removing day and bringing night, and distinguishing between day and night – the Lord of Hosts is His Name. The living, enduring God will always rule over us, forever.

The "changing of times" entails the replacement of the sun with the moon and stars, and vice versa. The sun and the moon are meant to rule, respectively, over the day and the night. As such, they served, in the pagan world, as gods in their own right. The danger posed by their supposed power causing God's Kingship to be forgotten, is described by Yeshayahu:

And it shall be on that day that the Lord will punish the host of the high heaven and the kings of the earth upon the earth... and the moon will be confounded and the sun ashamed, for the Lord of Hosts will reign in Mount Tzion and in Jerusalem, and there will be glory before His elders. (*Yeshayahu* 24:21-23)

The blessing "Who brings on evening" ends with God's Kingship, as shown in the daily changing of guard of the rulers of day and night. Daniel applies this metaphor to the changing of kings in Nevukhadnetzar's dream.

In addition, Daniel gives thanks and praise for the very revelation of the secret of the dream. The wise men of Babylon had told Nevukhadnetzar that there was no one alive who could reveal such secrets.

The true meaning of man's secrets and the knowledge of them is the subject of *Iyov's* appeal to God:

Although You know that I shall not be condemned, and there is none who can deliver from Your hand. Your hands have formed me and fashioned me round about, yet You destroy me. Remember, I pray You, that You fashioned me as clay, and You will return me to dust. Do You not pour me out like milk, and curdle me like cheese? You have clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. You have granted me life and favor, and Your

Providence preserves my spirit. But You hide these things in Your heart, I know that it is with You. If I sin then You mark me, and You will not acquit me of my transgression. (*Iyov* 10:7-14)

Iyov presents a harsh argument. God created his innermost parts, and as such, He is aware of his thoughts and desires. When a person has no place to hide his darker emotions, how can he ever be acquitted in judgment? When it comes to human justice, a person has the sense that even if he transgresses, he may perhaps not be caught. But in God's all-encompassing system, in which no action and no person can ever escape His knowledge, the situation seems unfair; God can always judge the person unfavorably. This being the case, what is the point of creating him?

Iyov's argument brings to mind Orwell's mythological "thought police" in his book *1984*. They are everywhere, and the individual faces the impossible challenge of adapting even his thoughts to the wishes of the regime. But can such a complaint be raised against God, from Whom there is no escape because He knows all secrets?

God's knowledge of man's secrets by virtue of having created his innermost parts is also addressed by the psalmist in *Tehillim*:

Of the chief musician, a psalm of David: Lord, You have searched me, and known me. You know when I sit down and when I get up; You understand my thoughts from afar. You measure my going about and my lying down, and You know all of my ways. For before a word is on my tongue, behold, Lord, You know it all. You have beset me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too sonderful for me, it is too high for me to attain it. Where shall I go from Your spirit, where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven – there You are; if I make my bed in Sheol – behold, You are there. If I take up the wings of morning and dwell in the furthest parts of the sea – even there Your hand would guide me, and Your right hand would hold me. If I say, "Surely darkness envelops me, and the light is night around me" – even the darkness is not too dark for You, and the night shines like day; the darkness and light are equivalent. For you made my innermost parts, You knit me together in my mother's womb. I will praise You for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wondrous, and my soul knows that well. My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in secret and wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance, for in Your book everything is written; also the days in which they would be fashioned, for it was one of them. How precious Your thoughts are to me, O God! How great is the sum of them! If I were to count them, they would be more numerous than the sand; if I were to make an end of them, I would still be with You. Surely, O God, You will slay the wicked: therefore, men of blood, depart from me, who speak of You with wickedness, and Your enemies who take Your Name in vain. Do I not hate those, O Lord, who hate You? And do I not strive with those who rise up against You? I hate them with the utmost hatred, I regard them as my enemies. Search me, O God, and

know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the everlasting path. (*Tehillim* 139:1-24)

The idea of attempting to flee from God is familiar to us from the story of the prophet Yona, who flees to Tarshish in an outward movement away from God. The psalmist in *Tehillim* attempts to flee inward, as it were, into his own depths, seeking an escape from God in his innermost thoughts and desires. Like Iyov, he discovers that God – Who created every aspect of him – knows all his secrets, and there is no escape from Him.

But there is a great difference between the psalmist and Iyov in terms of where this inquiry leads them. Iyov concludes, in despair:

Why, then, did You bring me forth from the womb? I should have perished, such that no eye would have seen me. (*Iyov* 10:18)

King David, author of *Tehillim*, reaches a different conclusion:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the everlasting path. (*Tehillim* 139:23-24)

God's knowledge of man's innermost thoughts and impulses is not meant to trap him in judgment before God; rather, it allows God to help him to correct his conduct and to guide him in the correct path.

Let us return to our original subject whose innermost world is known to God – Nevukhadnetzar, the mighty king whose dream is revealed. Is this for the purpose of trapping him in judgment or for the purposes of repair?

We have seen above that God's involvement in Nevukhadnetzar's life brings the king to a recognition of Him and a partial correction of his actions. In the next *shiur*, we will discuss this at greater length. When Nevukhadnetzar comes to understand God's ability to reveal secrets, he adopts a path closer to that of King David than to that of Iyov.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] Nevukhadnetzar is also referred to as God's servant in a previous prophecy about the imminent complete destruction: "Therefore, so says the Lord of Hosts: Because you have not listened to My words, behold – I shall send and take all the families of the north, says God, and [I will send] to Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon, My servant, and I shall bring them against this land, and against its inhabitants, and against all of these nations around, and I shall destroy them completely and make them an astonishment and a hissing and eternal ruins. And I shall cause to cease among them the sound of joy and the sound of gladness, the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride, the sound of millstones and the light of the

lamp. And this entire land will be a desolation, a waste, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years" (*Yirmiyahu* 25:8-11).

[2] See *Yeshayahu* chapters 10, 45.

[3] See *Seder Olam* chapter 28 and Rashi on *Daniel* 2:1.

[4] See, especially, *Shabbat* 149b.

[5] See Rambam's explanation: "He wished to teach us that whatever a prophet sees in a prophetic vision is true and correct for the prophet; he has no doubt at all concerning any of it... And the proof of this is that he [Avraham] hurried to slaughter his only son, whom he loved, as he had been commanded...." (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3:24).

[6] Similarly, we read of the prophecy conveyed to the man of God who comes to Beit El to proclaim the destruction of the altar of Yerav'am. The prophet rebels against God's word and eats in Beit El. God's message concerning his punishment is conveyed to him, according to most of the commentators, through a false prophet whom he encounters, rather than personally and directly. This also explains Shaul's visit to the sorcerer, but the scope of our study does not allow for further discussion.