

SEFER DANIEL
By Rav Yaakov Medan

Shiur #19:
Daniel's Prayer (Sefer Daniel, chapter 9)

1. Was Daniel wrong in his calculation?

In *shiurim* #9-11, we examined chapter 6 of *Sefer Daniel*. We will now skip chapters 7-8, which we have already discussed, and move on to chapter 9. In this *shiur* and the next, we will try to address the questions that we raised previously: Why does Daniel give up his life for prayer, seemingly going against the *halakha*? And why does Daniel pray facing Jerusalem in its destruction and not to one of the other specific directions for prayer, as was customary in Babylon at the time of the *Amoraim*? Finally, what is the significance of the discrepancy between the *Talmud Bavli* and the *Yerushalmi* concerning the requirement to face the Temple while praying even when the Temple is destroyed?

Chapter 9 begins by focusing the reader on the historical chronology:

In the first year of Darius, son of Achashverosh, of the seed of Media, who was coronated over the kingdom of the Chaldeans. (9:1)

King Darius who appears here is the same Darius the Mede who appeared previously in chapter 6 of *Sefer Daniel*. He is not the same king as the Persian Darius,^[1] in whose time the Second Temple was built. Rather, he is the Darius mentioned in the books of *Chaggai*, *Zekharia*, *Ezra*, and *Nechemia*. The reign of the Persian Darius, according to *Chazal's* calculation, was about 18 years after Darius the Mede. In between them were Cyrus (Koresh) and Achashverosh, who appears in *Megillat Esther*. The father of Darius the Mede was also named Achashverosh, but he was not the king from *Megillat Esther*. There is a tradition that maintains that the Persian Darius was the son of Achashverosh from *Megillat Esther*, but there is no support for this view in other sources. In any event, even if this tradition is correct, there were two different men named Achashverosh and two different men named Darius.^[2]

To return to the text, following the notation of historical context, we read:

In the first year of his reign I, Daniel, considered in the books the number of the years, concerning which the word of God came to Yirmiyahu, the prophet, that the desolations of Jerusalem would last for seventy years. And I set my face to the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes. And I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, and said: "O Lord, the great and awesome God, Who keeps covenant and mercy with those that love You and with those who keep Your your commandments. We have

sinned, and have dealt iniquitously, and have acted wickedly, and have rebelled, and have turned aside from Your commandments and from Your judgments; and we did not listen to Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your Name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. Righteousness, O Lord, belongs to you, while we have shame, as at this day: the men of Yehuda, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all of Israel, those who are near and those who are far off, through all the countries where You have driven them, because of the treachery which they have shown towards You. O Lord, we have shame – our kings, our princes, and our fathers – because we have sinned against You. Compassion and forgiveness belong to the Lord our God, for we have rebelled against Him and have not obeyed the Lord our God, to follow His teachings which He set before us by the hand of His servants, the prophets. All of Israel have transgressed Your Torah and have turned aside, so as not to obey Your voice; and so the curse is poured out upon us, and the oath that is written in the Torah of Moshe, the servant of God, for we have sinned against Him. And He has fulfilled His word, which He spoke against us, and against our judges that judged us, bringing upon us a great evil, such that under the entire Heaven there has not been done as has been done in Jerusalem. As is written in the Torah of Moshe, all this evil has come upon us; yet we have not entreated the Lord our God, that we might turn back from our iniquities, and understand Your truth. Therefore, the Lord watched over the evil and brought it upon us; for the Lord our God is righteous in all His works which He has done, and we have not obeyed Him. And now, Lord our God, You having brought forth Your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and having made Yourself renowned, as at this day – we have sinned, we have acted wickedly. (9:2-15)

Daniel's confession then becomes a plea:

O Lord, according to all Your righteousness, I pray You, let Your anger and Your fury be turned away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people have become a reproach to all who are round about us. And now, our God, hear the prayer of Your servant and his supplications, and cause Your face to shine upon Your Sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake. My Lord, incline Your ear and hear; open Your eyes and see our desolations, and the city which is called by Your Name; for it is not because of our righteousness that we present our supplications before You, but rather because of Your great compassions. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act; do not delay, for Your own sake, O my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your Name. (9:16-19)

As quoted above, Daniel starts his prayer with the following introduction:

In the first year of his reign I, Daniel, considered in the books the number of the years, concerning which the word of God came to Yirmiyahu, the prophet, that the desolations of Jerusalem would last for seventy years. (9:2)

The *gemara* expresses surprise at this calculation, and Rabba supplies an explanation so audacious that, had it not been recorded here, no-one would dare suggest it:

Rabba said: Even Daniel was mistaken in this calculation. (*Megilla* 12a)

Why does Rabba believe that Daniel was mistaken in his calculation? Jerusalem was destroyed in the 11th year of the reign of Tzidkiyahu, which corresponded to the 19th year of the reign of Nevukhadnetzar. Babylon was destroyed in what would have been the 70th year of Nevukhadnetzar (some 25 years after his death), and Darius the Mede rose to power in the same year. Darius occupied the throne for less than a year, and was succeeded by Cyrus, who issued the proclamation that permitted the Jews to return to *Eretz Yisrael*. In other words, only 52 years had passed since the destruction of Jerusalem when Daniel made his calculation, and he was therefore mistaken.

This represents the view of all the *Geonim* and *Rishonim*, as noted by Ibn Ezra:

All of the *Geonim* agreed unanimously with the view of the Sages, who said that Daniel was mistaken in his calculation, for Jerusalem was destroyed only when Tzidkiyahu was captured, and this was in the 19th year of the reign of Nevukhadnetzar. For Yirmiyahu the prophet said, “When seventy years are completed for Babylon I shall remember you” – and so it was, when Belshatzar was killed, and Cyrus took the throne, he issued a proclamation and the Jews went up from Babylon to Jerusalem, and this was God's remembrance. And behold – nineteen years still remained for Jerusalem to stand in ruins, and this period represented the reign of Cyrus, the Persian. When one adds to this the reign of the elder Darius, the Mede, as well as the reign of Achashverosh, and two years of the reign of Darius the Persian, who was the son of Esther, then the period of the ruin of Jerusalem would have lasted a total of seventy years. (Ibn Ezra on 9:2)

But how is this possible? Could Daniel be guilty of such a gross miscalculation – a mistake of 18 years in the context of such a short period, all of which took place during his own lifetime? Could Daniel, with all his wisdom and the *ruach ha-kodesh* that he possessed, not have known how old he was? Did he not understand the meaning of “the desolation of Jerusalem” and when that period began?

R. Yehuda ha-Levi appreciated the difficulty inherent in this idea and added eighteen years to the accepted chronology so as to make the history conform with Daniel's calculation. He maintains that seventy years are marked from the destruction of the Temple until the return in the days of Cyrus. Ibn Ezra notes his position:

And Yehuda ha-Levi said: One must question how Daniel, who was a prophet and a sage, could have miscalculated 19 years out of 70 years. And he proposed that the seventy year total was for the kingdom of Babylon, representing the

period that Jerusalem lay in ruins, and then came God's remembrance – and not as calculated by the *Geonim*. As evidence, he cites *Divrei ha-Yamim*: “And they shall be servants to him and to his descendants until the reign of the kingdom of Persia” – and Cyrus the Persian was the first of their kings. And it is written there further, “To fulfill the word of God as spoken by Yirmiyahu, until the land had made good its *Shabbatot*, for so long as it lay desolate it rested, to fulfill seventy years.”

Ibn Ezra goes on to propose that Daniel's mistake was not in his calculation of the years, but rather in his interpretation of the concept of “desolation”:

And they said that Daniel began calculating the years of destruction from the time that Nevukhadnetzar led Yehoyakim to Babylon; thereafter, he reigned for eight years, and Tzidkiyahu reigned for a further 11 years. Thus, a total of seventy years of the destruction of Jerusalem were complete.^[3]

The difficulty with all of these explanations is clear. To our view, the problem arises from the assumption, common to all three explanations, that the seventy years are to be counted from the ruin of Jerusalem mentioned in the verse. Indeed, on the face of it, when Daniel offers his prayer, only 52 have passed since the actual destruction.

As we understand it, the “seventy years” refers not to the desolation of Jerusalem, but rather to the period starting with God's word to Yirmiyahu the prophet concerning that destruction. Yirmiyahu uttered his prophecy concerning the destruction of Jerusalem at the hand of Nevukhadnetzar in the fourth year of Yehoyakim, which is the first year of the reign of Nevukhadnetzar, eighteen years prior to the destruction. From this point until the first year of Darius the Mede, there are indeed seventy years:

The word that came to Yirmiyahu concerning all the people of Yehuda, in the fourth year of Yehoyakim, son of Yoshiyahu, king of Yehuda – which was the first year of Nevuchadretzar, king of Babylon... So says the Lord of Hosts: Because you have not heard My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, says the Lord, to Nevuchadretzar, king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them upon this land... And this whole land shall be a desolation, a waste; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are complete, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, says the Lord... (*Yirmiyahu* 25:1-12).

Indeed, then, seventy years had passed. If so, what was it that disturbed Daniel so deeply and caused him to pray with such broken-hearted supplication? After all, the time for redemption had arrived!

The seventy years in the prophecy of Yirmiyahu are mentioned again:

For so says the Lord: After seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will remember you, and fulfill My good word towards you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think about you, says the Lord – thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. And you shall call upon Me, and go, and pray to Me, and I will hear you. And you shall seek Me, and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.[4] And I will be found of you, says the Lord, and I will bring back your captivity, and gather you from all the nations, and from all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord; and I will bring you back to the place from which I exiled you. (ibid. 29:10-14)[5]

From this prophecy of consolation, it appears that seventy years is not a sufficient condition for redemption. Seventy years must pass from Nevukhadnetzar's ascent to power, but there is also a need for heartfelt prayer with a true, profound seeking of God:

And you shall call upon Me, and go, and pray to Me, and I will hear you. And you shall seek Me, and find Me, when when you search for Me with all your heart.

The redemption, in this sense, follows the same law as the fate of Belshatzar. As discussed in a previous *shiur*, his demise also came about at the conclusion of the seventy-year count, but was at the same time the result of God's evaluation of his own actions, actions subject to his own free choice. In the same way, in the case of *Am Yisrael*, a counting of the years is not sufficient. Redemption is also dependent on a great act of free choice – heartfelt, contrite prayer, with a genuine seeking of reconciliation with God.

We conclude, then, that Daniel's count of seventy years was perfectly accurate. When the seventieth year arrived, he knew that the redemption was dependent upon prayer and a seeking of God. His prayer, with the commencement of the year of the awaited redemption, was of critical importance. Yirmiyahu had anticipated this prayer; all the seventy years of destruction, from the fourth year of Yehoyakim, had awaited it. Everything depended on this moment.[6]

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] See *Nechemia* 12:22.

[2] An extensive discussion of the order of these kings as understood in academic scholarship and by *Chazal* is to be found in my article, "*Mavo le-Ma'amaro shel C. Chefetz al Malkhut Paras u-Madai*," *Megadim* 14 (5751), pp. 47-77, and in Chefetz's article, "*Malkhut Paras u-Madai bi-Tekufat Bayit Sheni u-Lefaneha – Iyyun Mechadash*," *ibid.*, pp. 78-147.

[3] According to his calculation here, Yehoyakim was exiled in his fourth year, and not only in his 11th year – the year in which he was put to death. This must reflect Ibn Ezra's understanding of the events, since the first eight years of Nevukhadnetzar's reign preceded the 11th year of Yehoyakim. (However, in his commentary on *Kohelet* 5:1, Ibn Ezra cites only the view that Daniel was indeed mistaken in his calculation.)

[4] This verse echoes and parallels the promise from the punishment set forth in *Sefer Devarim*: "And if you seek the Lord your God from there, you shall find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul" (*Devarim* 4:29).

[5] These seventy years are also mentioned in *Divrei ha-Yamim II*: "And those who had escaped the sword he carried away to Babylon, and they were servants to him and to his descendants until the reign of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill God's word as spoken by Yirmiyahu, until the land had made good its *Shabbatot*, for so long as it lay desolate it rested, to fulfill seventy years. And in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that the word of the Lord as spoken by Yirmiyahu might be fulfilled..." (36:20-22). Here, too, the text speaks of servitude to the king of Babylon and to the king of Persia, and this servitude begins with the rise of Nevukhadnetzar to power in the fourth year of Yehoyakim and continues until the return to Tzion, in the first year of the reign of Cyrus.

The prophet Zekharia also speaks of the seventy years of fury upon Jerusalem: "Then the angel of the Lord spoke and said: 'O Lord of Hosts, how long will You not have compassion upon Jerusalem and upon the cities of Yehuda, against which You have maintained Your fury for seventy years?' (*Zekharia* 1:12). But there the fury upon Jerusalem is counted from the time of the destruction, in the 11th year of Tzidkiyahu, which was the 19th year of Nevukhadnetzar. We deduce from Zekharia here that these seventy years last until the second year of Darius the Persian, when Zekharia's prophecy was uttered and when the Temple began to be rebuilt, after the original building was halted owing to the conspiring of the enemies of Yehuda.

Eighteen years passed from Nevukhadnetzar's rise to power until the destruction of Jerusalem. Eighteen years passed from the return to the land in the days of Cyrus until the building of the Temple in the second year of Darius the Persian. Hence, there are two different systems for counting seventy years, and they overlap throughout the 52 years between the destruction of Jerusalem and the return to the land.

[6] Our explanation of the situation, as arising from the verses cited from Yirmiyahu, proposes a new understanding. We are used to the scenario set forth in the teaching of the *gemara* in *Sanhedrin*: "R. Alexandri said: R. Yehoshua ben Levi pointed out a contradiction. It is written [that redemption will come] 'at its time,' and it is also written [concerning the redemption], 'I shall hasten it' (*Yishayahu* 60:22). [The two verses may be reconciled, as follows:] If they are worthy, 'I shall hasten it'; if they are not worthy, [the redemption will come] 'in its time'" (*Sanhedrin* 98a). From here it would seem that one of the two conditions is sufficient to bring redemption: Either the time allotted for the exile comes to an end ("at its time"), or alternatively, *Am Yisrael* is worthy of redemption, even if the allotted time for their exile is not yet over ("I shall hasten it"). Our "stringent" interpretation of Yirmiyahu suggests that both conditions must be fulfilled: both the merit of *Am Yisrael* – their prayer and seeking of God – and the end of the period of exile. Our interpretation accords with the opinion of Rav in the *gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 97b): "Rav said: All the anticipated dates for the redemption have already gone by; the matter now depends solely on repentance and good deeds." What he means is that the predestined time for redemption is already upon us, but so long as *Am Yisrael* lacks the necessary merit, the redemption will not be realized. Both conditions must be met.

There is also a middle opinion cited – that of Shemuel, who maintains that there is actually only one precondition, and that is the conclusion of the period ordained for exile: "And Shemuel said: It is sufficient that a mourner observe his period of mourning." It may be that there is support for this position in the verse from *Yishayahu*: "Bid Jerusalem to take heart, and proclaim to it that its service of war is over, that its iniquity is forgiven, that it has received from God's hand double for all its sins" (*Yeshayahu* 40:2).

The opposite view seems to be adopted by R. Eliezer, who insists that if *Am Yisrael* engage in repentance, they are redeemed, but if they do not engage in repentance, they are not redeemed. Here again, it would appear that just one condition is sufficient – but to his view that condition is that *Am Yisrael* merit the redemption, not the criterion of time.