

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU
Rav David Sabato

Sponsored by Aaron and Tzipora Ross and family
in honor of the *yahrtzeits* of our esteemed grandparents:
Neil Fredman (Shmuel Nachamu ben Shlomo Moshe HaKohen, 10 Tevet),
Clara Fredman (Chaya bat Yitzchak Dovid, 15 Tevet),
and Walter Rosenthal (Shimon ben Moshe, 16 Tevet).

Shiur #11: The Personal Dimension of Yirmiyahu's Prophecy (Part I)

I. Introduction

In the next three *shiurim*, we will reexamine chapters 1-20 of the book of *Yirmiyahu*, focusing on the personal dimension in them and the unique figure of Yirmiyahu as a prophet and a person.

Yirmiyahu stands out among the prophets owing to the deep involvement of his personal life with his prophecies. There is no other prophet whose prophecies are as inseparably connected to the prophet's personal life as those of Yirmiyahu.

Embedded among Yirmiyahu's chapters of prophecy are his personal prayers, in which he pours out his supplications before God and reveals his doubts and troubles. From his words we learn about the fierce struggles in which he is involved; we are exposed to the shame and humiliation caused him by his neighbors and enemies and to the extreme loneliness that he suffers, lacking family and a circle of friends.

In the course of his prophecies, Yirmiyahu experiences severe emotional crises that bring him even to detest his life and mission, and he formulates his crises in harsh and difficult words that are almost unprecedented in the books of prophecy. This raises several questions. Why was Yirmiyahu singled out for such deep exposure of his personal world, as compared to all the other prophets? From an instructional and substantive perspective, what is the importance of Yirmiyahu's personal biographical details for understanding his prophecies?

II. Biographical Details in Yirmiyahu's Prophecy of Consecration

Already in Yirmiyahu's prophecy of consecration, which includes the gist of his prophecies, we find allusions to the central role that the prophet's personal life will play in the book.¹ The book opens with the words:

The words of Yirmiyahu the son of Chilkiyahu, of the priests who were in Anatot in the land of Binyamin.

The Radak explains this opening as follows:

The reason that it begins with "The words" is that the book is comprised of all the words of prophecy words that he prophesied about Israel and the nations, **and so too the words about himself, what happened to him with Israel in connection with his prophecy...** Yirmiyahu related at the beginning of his book about himself: "Before I formed you in the belly, I knew you," and the entire matter. And so too in the middle of his book, he related of the evil things that were done to him.

According to the Radak, the phrase "the words of Yirmiyahu" refer also to the biographical sections integrated into the book's prophecies.

Another allusion to this tension is found several verses later, at the beginning of Yirmiyahu's first prophecy, which describes his consecration to prophecy (v. 5):

Before I formed you in the belly I knew you, and before you came out of the womb I sanctified you and I ordained you a prophet to the nations.

These words contain the central conflict that will accompany Yirmiyahu throughout his life. His consecration to prophecy even before he was born turns his prophecy into something that was coerced upon him, a sort of fate that is not subject at all to his choice. As we will see below, Yirmiyahu's struggle with this decree arises time and again in his cries and prayers throughout the book.

III. Yirmiyahu Feels the Pain of His People

Yirmiyahu's personal involvement in his prophecies is clearly revealed in the collection of prophecies of calamity in chapter 4. In this chapter, Yirmiyahu sees, in a kind of flash of prophecy, the sights and sounds of the various stages of the destruction of Jerusalem: The arrival of an enemy from the north that is likened to a lion (5-8, 12-13); the impotent reaction of the leadership in Jerusalem (9); and the destruction and devastation in *Eretz Yisrael* in the wake of the enemy's actions (23-29). Yirmiyahu's passionate reactions to the horrifying sights and sounds in his visions are embedded in

¹ We elaborated on this in the *shiur* about Yirmeyahu's prophecy of consecration. In the context of the present *shiur*, we will repeat only those points that are relevant to our discussion.

these prophetic accounts. In verse 10, Yirmiyahu bursts out in response to the account of the destruction in vv. 5-8 and the description of the leadership's loss of its path in vv. 9-10:

And it shall come to pass on that day, says the Lord, that the heart of the king shall fail, and the heart of the princes; and the priests shall be astonished, and the prophets shall wonder. Then said I, "Ah, Lord God, surely You have greatly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, You shall have peace; whereas the sword reaches to the soul!"

Yirmiyahu's response is sharp – he "accuses" God of having deceived the people, inciting and misleading them by way of the words of the false prophets that were mentioned at the end of the previous verse, and He thus sealed their fate. With these words, Yirmiyahu shifts all at once from his role of prosecutor and rebuker of the people to the role of defense attorney, who speaks out from his heart against God and His decree.²

In verses 19-21, Yirmiyahu painfully responds to the difficult visions and sounds of vv. 5-6:

My bowels, my bowels! I am shaken in the chambers of my heart; my heart moans within me; I cannot hold my peace, because you have heard, O my soul, the sound of the shofar, the alarm of war.
Destruction follows upon destruction, for the whole land is spoiled; suddenly are my tents spoiled, and my curtains in a moment.
How long shall I see the standard and hear the sound of the shofar?

The difficult visions of calamity physically affect Yirmiyahu, and his body issues cries of pain: "My bowels, my bowels!"³ He appears to be unable to contain his emotions and keep silent in the face of what he sees, and he begs that the visions and sounds of the horrors of war should be removed from him:

How long shall I see the standard and hear the sound of the shofar?

The chapter ends with a description of the punishment of Jerusalem, which is likened to a woman who futilely tries to beautify herself in the eyes of her lovers:

And you, O ruined one, what will you do? Though you clothe yourself with crimson, though you deck yourself with ornaments of gold, though you enlarge your eyes with paint, in vain shall you make yourself fair; your lovers will despise you, they will seek your life. (30)

² Yirmeyahu's struggle with false prophets who mislead the people appears several times in the book, and we will encounter it again below.

³ The bowels and the heart are the seat of the emotions. See, for example, *Eikha* 1:20: "Behold, O Lord, for I am in distress; my bowels are troubled; my heart is turned within me."

The next verse continues with the image of Jerusalem as a woman, but the tone changes completely. Yirmiyahu turns his ear to the daughter of Zion who sobs in despair, and it appears that he identifies and weeps with her:⁴

For I have heard a voice as of a woman in travail, the anguish as of her that brings forth her first child, the voice of the daughter of Zion, sobbing and spreading out her hands, saying: Woe is me, now! For my soul faints before the slayers.

Yirmiyahu's deep identification with the suffering of his people that he experiences firsthand brings him almost to the point of merging with them.

Another window into Yirmiyahu's soul opens before us toward the end of chapter 8 (v. 18):

When I would comfort myself against sorrow, my heart is faint in me.

In this verse, Yirmiyahu describes the enormous tension between the grief that he feels and his failed efforts to overcome it. In the next verse (19), Yirmiyahu moves on to describe the sounds heard in his ears, bringing grief:

Behold the voice of the cry of the daughter of my people coming from a far country: Is not the Lord in Zion? Is not her king in her?

These are the voices of his people crying out for salvation and wondering about the long duration of their troubles. (This may be referring to those who were exiled to Babylonia with Yehoyakhin; see *Da'at Mikra* commentary, ad loc.).

Countering this amazement, God responds with puzzlement (19):

Why have they provoked Me to anger with their carved idols?

The passage continues once again with the voices of the desperate exiles (20):

The harvest is passed, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.

Immediately afterwards, Yirmiyahu joins himself to the distress of his people (21-23):

For the hurt of the daughter of my people, I am broken; I am thrown into gloom; astonishment has taken hold of me.
Is there no balm in Gilad; is there no physician there? Why then is not the heart of the daughter of my people recovered?
Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night of the slain of the daughter of my people!

⁴ The term "daughter of Zion" as a designation of Jerusalem appears many times in the lamentations over the destruction in the book of *Eikha*, which is also attributed to Yirmeyahu.

Once again, we find tension between the words of Yirmiyahu as a prophet and as a person. In response to the words of God in the mouth of Yirmiyahu, which justify the verdict issued against the people and mete out the measure of justice – **"Why** have they provoked Me to anger with their carved idols?" – Yirmiyahu himself expresses his amazement in his personal words, together with the rest of the people, about the delay in the salvation and healing: **"Why** then is not the heart of the daughter of my people recovered?" With this question, Yirmiyahu stands as the representative of his people, who identifies with their grief and suffering and weeps with them day and night.⁵

In one of Yirmiyahu's later prophecies of destruction (13:15-17), we find his weeping over his people spelled out in greater detail:

Hear, and give ear; be not proud, for the Lord has spoken.
Give glory to the Lord your God, before it grows dark, and before your feet stumble upon the mountains of twilight, and while you look for light, he turns it into the shadow of death, and makes it gross darkness.
But if you will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret for your pride; and my eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock is carried away captive.

At the very heart of the prophecy of exile that is addressed to the people and their leaders and calls upon them to listen to the prophecy and cease acting proudly, Yirmiyahu suddenly shifts to a description of what is taking place inside him.

Here too, what stands out is the verbal and conceptual connection between Yirmiyahu's personal remarks and the prophecy in which they are embedded, as stated by the Radak:

"But if you will not hear it" – The prophet is saying: "If you will not hear" this prophecy that I speak before you from the word of God, "my soul shall weep in secret," because I see your end... "for your pride," because of your pride that you wish not to humble yourselves to hear the word of God as it was told to you: "Be not proud."⁶

⁵ The term "daughter of my people" appears four times in this section. Apart from one appearance in the book of *Yeshayahu*, it is found only in the book of *Yirmeyahu* (9 times) and in the book of *Eikha* (5 times), almost always in the context of lamentation and pain. It embodies the collective image of the nation as a grieving virgin, full of pain and sorrow.

⁶ The Midrash interprets this verse in a different and most daring manner, as the words of God Himself (*Devarim Rabba, Va'etchanan*): "At that time, Metatron came and fell on his face, and said before Him: 'Master of the universe, I will weep, and You will not weep!' He said to him: 'If you do not let me weep now, I will enter a place that you are not permitted to enter and weep, as it is stated: "But if you will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret for your pride" (*Yirmeyahu* 13:17).'" The Holy One, blessed is He, said to the ministering angels: 'Come, let us go, you and I, and see in My house, what the enemies are doing there.' Immediately, the Holy One, blessed is He, and the ministering angels, and Yirmeyahu went, and when the Holy One, blessed is He, saw the Temple, He said: 'This is My house, and this is My rest, in which the enemies came and did as they pleased.' At that time, the Holy One,

Yirmiyahu is not only a prophet of rebuke; he is in pain and weeps over the failure of his prophecy and the fate of Israel. Attention should also be paid to the nature of his weeping – "in secret." According to the Radak, "the soul's weeping in secret refers to worry," but it is possible that secret weeping reflects Yirmiyahu's tense and complicated situation. As a reproaching prophet, he is not permitted to cry in front of the people, because this would contradict his standing and his mission as God's prophet to the people. But he is unable to contain his pain and stifle his crying completely, and so he is forced to weep in secret, far from the eyes and ears of the people.

We find a similar phenomenon of secret weeping by Joseph in Egypt, who pretends to be a heartless ruler in front of his brothers, but is unable to stand up to the psychological and emotional burden, and so retires to cry in a hidden room.⁷ Thus it says at one of the most intricate points in the story (*Bereishit* 43:29-31):

And he lifted up his eyes and saw his brother Binyamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your younger brother of whom you spoke to me?" And he said, "God be gracious to you, my son." And Yosef made haste, for his affection was kindled towards his brother, and he sought where to weep, and he entered into the chamber and wept there. And he washed his face and went out, and restrained himself, and said, "Set on bread."

We find a similar phenomenon regarding the prophet Elisha. When Chazael comes to Elisha on a mission from Ben-Hadad, king of Aram, Elisha is compelled to reveal to him the prophecy concerning his appointment to be king in place of Ben-Hadad. But the prophetic mission clashes with the bitter knowledge of the terrible things that Chazael will do to his people, and Elisha tries to hide this prophecy (II *Melakhim* 8:11-12):

And he settled his countenance steadfastly, as long as he could; then the man of God wept. And Chazael said, "Why does my lord weep?" And he answered, "Because I know the evil that you will do to the children of Israel; their strongholds will you set on fire, and their young men will you slay with the sword, and will dash their infants, and rip up their women with child."

Elisha tries to "settle his countenance," that is, not to show his inner feelings, but he fails, and in the end he bursts into tears before Chazael.

blessed is He, wept and said: 'Woe is Me, on account of My house. My sons, where are you? My priests, where are You? Those who love Me, where are you? What should I do with you? I warned you, but you did not repent.'

⁷ This correspondence between Yosef and Yirmeyahu joins a series of correspondences between the two figures which will be discussed in future *shiurim*. The most striking parallel is, of course, Yirmeyahu's being cast into the pit.

The unique and complex situation of Yirmiyahu, who bears the tension between the prophet in him and the person that he is, is concisely described in the following Midrash (*Mekhilta, Pischea* 1):

It turns out that there were three prophets: One demanded respect for the father and for the son, one demanded respect for the father but not for the son, and one demanded respect for the son but not for the father. Yirmiyahu demanded respect for the father and for the son...

IV. Yirmiyahu's Prayers

Another aspect of Yirmiyahu's personal world reveals itself to us in his prayers. Many personal prayers are scattered throughout the book of *Yirmiyahu*. It seems that here too Yirmiyahu veers from the style that characterizes most of the other prophets, both in the quantity and in the intensity of those prayers. In this section, we will try to understand the significance of this deviation.

The connection between prophecy and prayer is deep and fundamental. In fact, the first mention of prayer in the Bible is linked to prophecy, as God says to Avimelekh (*Bereishit* 20:7):

Now therefore restore the man's wife: for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live.

Moreover, in general it can be said that the great prayers in the Bible are for the most part attributed to the prophets, the people who are closest to God.

This notwithstanding, we seem to be dealing with two actions that are essentially opposites. Prophecy is receiving the word of God from up above and directed downwards, whereas prayer expresses man's desires from down below and is directed upwards.

It can be said, then, that a prophet who is engaged in prayer is a prophet who is personally involved in the content of his prophecies. In this context, it is fitting to cite the eloquent words of Y. Muffs:

In Israelite prophecy, God turns to man. Because the prophet is secondary to his prophecy, he being merely the messenger of the word and the appeal, and not the speaker or appealer himself, he is seen by man as a passive figure lacking independent will. Yirmiyahu says: "I sat not in the assembly of the merry-makers, nor rejoiced; I sat alone because of Your hand: for You have filled me with indignation" (*Yirmiyahu* 15:17). And similarly Yechezkel: "So a spirit lifted me up, and took me away, and I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit; and the hand of the Lord was strong upon me" (*Yechezkel* 3:14). In the words of the prophets, the hand of God symbolizes the feeling of Divine power that takes hold of the prophet.

This power severs the prophet's connections with human society and fills him with both prophetic rage and deep spiritual depression. But one who sees only the missionary aspect of prophet has not seen anything. The prophet has not one role but two roles.

On the one hand, he is the passive herald of the Divine word, the mouthpiece for calamity and the measure of justice. But on the other hand, he is the independent advocate in the heavenly court who attempts to rip up the evil decree with the help of his only weapon – prophetic prayer and supplication...⁸

In light of this, let us now examine some of Yirmiyahu's prayers.

In chapter 7 (16), following the prophecy concerning the Temple of God, God says to Yirmiyahu:

Therefore pray not you for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to Me: for I will not hear you.

It stands to reason that immediately following the dire prophecy that he delivered about Israel and the destruction of the Temple, a prophecy for which he almost paid with his life, as we learned in chapter 26, Yirmiyahu rushed to stand in prayer before God, as the people's representative who seeks to cancel the evil decree. But God stops him from praying, as is described in the verse.

Yirmiyahu is told a similar thing following the harsh prophecy recorded in chapter 11 (14):

Therefore pray not you for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, for I will not hear them at the time that they cry to Me for their trouble.

In these verses, there is an addition that explains why Yirmiyahu is being silenced: Since the people did not listen to Me beforehand and they did not obey the words of the prophets who were sent to them time and again, I will not listen to them when they call out to Me in their time of distress and crisis. Attention should be paid to the difference between the two chapters. In chapter 7 it says: "I will not hear you," whereas in chapter 11 it says: "I will not hear them at the time that they cry to Me." Yirmiyahu's cry is, as it were, the cry of the people.

Yirmiyahu's generalizing himself with the people expresses the essence of his prayer; he calls out to God as the representative of the people. But since the people do not see him as their representative and agent, but rather as a raging prophet of reproach who must be executed and silenced, Yirmiyahu cannot stand in prayer before God as the people's representative. This is the gist of Yirmiyahu's tragedy.

⁸ Y. Muffs, "*Bein Rachamim Le-Din: Tefilatam shel Nevi'im*," in *Torah Nidreshet* (Tel-Aviv, 1984).

Chapter 14 describes the severe drought that hit the country in the days of Yirmiyahu, in the wake of which Yirmiyahu offers a prayer as the people's representative. Here too, his prayer encounters God's refusal to listen (14:11-12):

Then said the Lord to me: Pray not for this people for their good. When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt-offering and a meal offering, I will not accept them; but I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence.

The novelty in this chapter is found in Yirmiyahu's response. He is no longer capable of remaining silent, and so he explodes and complains against God's verdict (13):⁹

Then said I: Ah, Lord God! Behold, the prophets say to them: You shall not see the sword, neither shall you have famine; but I will give you assured peace in this place.

Nevertheless, his complaint is not accepted; blame heaped upon the false prophets does not exempt the people from punishment. In verses 14-15, God replies:

Then the Lord said to me: The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spoke I to them. They prophesy to you a false vision and divination, and a thing of naught, and the deceit of their own heart.

Therefore, thus says the Lord concerning the prophets that prophesy in My name, and I sent them not, yet they say: Sword and famine shall not be in this land; by sword and famine shall those prophets be consumed.

Yirmiyahu does not stop praying, and it appears that in response to his efforts later in the chapter (19-22), God says to Yirmiyahu (15:1-2):

Then said the Lord to me: Though Moshe and Shmuel were to stand before Me, My mind could not incline towards the people; send them out of My sight, and let them depart.

And it shall come to pass, if they say to you: Whither shall we depart? Then you shall tell them: Thus says the Lord: Such as are for death, to death, and such as are for the sword, to the sword, and such as are for the famine, to the famine, and such as are for the captivity, to the captivity.

⁹ As we mentioned in the past, the expression, "Ah, Lord," in Yirmeyahu's prophecies, introduces an argument between the prophet and God. There is a clear substantive connection between his cry here and his earlier cry (4:10), which also relates to the false prophets and which attempts to argue in favor of the people: "Ah, Lord God, surely You have greatly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying: You shall have peace."

At the outset, mention is made of two great prophets of the past: Moshe and Shmuel. There is a striking common feature shared by Moshe and Shmuel in the context of our prophecy – both of them prayed for the people in times of crisis. Moshe prayed on behalf of the people following the sin of the Golden Calf, when God wished to destroy them, and he succeeded in mitigating the evil decree (*Shemot* 32:11-14). And Shmuel prayed on behalf of the people at Even-ha-Ezer, and since his prayer was accepted, the people were saved (I *Shmuel* 7:8-9).

Moshe and Shmuel are mentioned together in a similar context in *Tehillim* 99 (6):

Moshe and Aharon among His priests, and Shmuel among those who call upon His name; they called upon the Lord and He answered them.

In the context of this psalm, the comparison between them relates to their prayers to God, which were answered positively.

Rashi notes another aspect of the comparison between the prophets and the periods:

Moshe and Shmuel – Both had to ask for mercy for Israel, but first they brought them to repent, and only afterwards did they pray on their behalf. It did not enter their minds to try to appease Me until they brought them to repent.

Moshe – "Put every man his sword by his side" (*Shemot* 32:27)... "And he scatter it upon the water" (v. 20), and afterwards: "I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I shall make atonement for your sin" (v. 30).

Shmuel at Mitzpa – "Then the children of Israel put away the Ba'alim" (I *Shmuel* 7:4), and afterwards, "Gather all Israel to Mitzpa and I will pray for you to the Lord" (v. 5).

You cannot bring them back to Me; therefore, do not pray for them.

According to the *midrash* cited by Rashi, the difference between the great prophets of the past and Yirmiyahu lies not in their respective ranks, but in the nature of their connection to the people. While Moshe and Shmuel preceded their prayers with a successful operation involving the repair of the people, Yirmiyahu failed in this regard and therefore cannot pray for them.

After Yirmiyahu's prayer was blocked for the third time, and in a sharp and absolute manner, comes a long passage in which Yirmiyahu complains about the great difficulties of his prophetic mission, and even regrets his very acceptance of the task (15:10-18).¹⁰ In the wake of his words, he receives a surprising answer from God (19-21):

Therefore, thus says the Lord: If you return, then will I bring you back, and you shall stand before me; and if you bring out the precious from

¹⁰ We shall deal with this passage at length in the next *shiur*.

the vile, you shall be as My mouth. Let them return to you, but return not you to them.

And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of brass, and they shall fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you; for I am with you to save you and to deliver you, says the Lord.

And I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and I will redeem you out of the hand of the terrible.

In order to understand the matter, let us return to the words of Y. Muffs, the first part of which was cited above:

Two prophets, Moshe and Shmuel, were famous for their prayers that could tear up verdicts and decrees. This power of prayer of Moshe and Shmuel was no small matter, the echo of their prayers being audible still in the book of *Tehilim*: "Moshe and Aharon among His priests, and Shmuel among those who call upon His name; they called upon the Lord, and He answered them." In this context, "calling" clearly refers to prayer. Another prophet, Yirmiyahu, stood full of rage and rebuke to the point that he appeared as if he were an enemy of Israel, though this was not true at all...

"Therefore pray not you for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to Me, for I will not hear you." God knows how the prophet will respond. He knows that that he is prepared to stand in prayer immediately after he informs him of the decree against the people – and God does not want to hear! In *Shmuel* it says: "And he cried to the Lord all night" (I *Shmuel* 15:11), whereas in *Yirmiyahu* it says: "Pray not." How will the prophet find an outlet for the love stored in his soul if he does not pray?

... God has enough with such arguments and he brings the argument to an end: "Though Moshe and Shmuel were to stand before Me, My mind could not incline towards the people: send them out of My sight and let them depart."

Every prophet finds salvation in prayer. Sometimes he is answered, and sometimes he is not answered, but he has an outlet for his personal pain. And if he is not answered, he grieves. But come and see the bitter fate of Yirmiyahu: Not only is his prayer not answered, but he is barred from the benefit of prayer. His mouth is shut by Divine order. The double nature of prophecy places the prophet under terrible psychological pressure, and if there is no compromise between the two extremes, he will either collapse or go crazy. And this is what we really hear about Yirmiyahu. The prophet cannot withstand this psychological pressure and for a moment he explodes: "Why is my pain perpetual and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will You be to me like a deceitful stream, like waters that fail?" (*Yirmiyahu* 15:18). At this moment, it is as if he ceases to be a prophet. He weakens, and the end of the passage testifies that this interpretation is correct: "Therefore thus says the Lord: If you return, then will I bring you back, and you shall stand before Me... you shall be as My mouth" (v. 19). If you return – this is a sign that he sinned. You shall stand before Me – this is a sign that for a short time, he turned away from God and did not stand in

His circle and was not His prophet. And therefore the conclusion: "And I will make you a fortified wall of brass" (v. 20). Before us there is another consecration similar to the one in chapter 1. But surely the prophet does not need a second consecration unless he ceased being a prophet for a short time! The prophet spoke with impudence, but nevertheless God consecrates him for prophecy a second time. Can we not learn from this that God does not oppose such independence of the prophets which finds expression in their turbulent prayers?

(Translated by David Strauss)