

THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU
Rav David Sabato

Shiur #13: The Personal Dimension of Yirmiyahu's Prophecy (Part III)

I. Yirmiyahu's Prohibition to Marry

As in chapter 15, in chapter 16 Yirmiyahu's personal life and destiny are inseparably bound to his prophecies, and his tragic way of life symbolizes the content of his prophecies. At the very beginning of the chapter, Yirmiyahu receives an unusually difficult order – to refrain from starting a family and to detach himself from human society as a sign of the calamity that will come upon the people, as described later in the chapter.¹

Verse 2 contains two prohibitions, one against taking a wife and another against having children;

(1) The word of the Lord came also to me, saying: (2) You shall **not** take you a wife, **nor** shall you have sons or daughters in this place.

In the continuation God explains the reason for each prohibition in chiasmic order, beginning from where he had left off. He first relates to having children:

(3) **For thus says the Lord** concerning the sons and concerning the daughters that are born **in this place**, and concerning their mothers that bore them, and concerning their fathers that begot them in this land: (4) they shall die of grievous deaths; they shall not be lamented; neither shall they be buried, but they shall be as dung upon the face of the earth.

He later returns to the prohibition to marry:

(9) **For thus says the Lord** of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will cause to cease **out of this place** before your eyes, and in our days, the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride.

Yirmiyahu is also ordered to detach himself from the grief and sadness of the people, as well as from their wedding celebrations – the two ends of the personal and communal life cycle:

¹ In my remarks below, I was greatly assisted by the article of Z. Falk, "Yirmiyahu Ve-Ha-Nisu'in," *Divrei Chug Iyyun Be-Tanakh Be-Veit Ha-Nasi*, pp. 130-139.

(5) For thus says the Lord: **Enter not into the house of mourning**, neither go to lament nor bemoan them; for I have taken away My peace from this people, says the Lord, both love and mercy. (6) Both the great and the small shall die in this land; they shall not be buried, neither shall men lament for them, nor gash themselves, nor make themselves bald for them; (7) neither shall men break bread for them during the mourning, to comfort him for the dead; neither shall men give them the cup of consolation to drink for his father or for his mother. (8) **They shall also not enter into the house of feasting**, to sit with them to eat and to drink. (9) For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will cause to cease out of this place before your eyes, and in your days, the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride.

What this means is that in the near future there will be a crisis so acute that it will undermine the human life cycle in a most dramatic manner. On the one hand, the traditional mourning rituals will not be observed because of the many dead; on the other hand, the sounds of marriage celebrations, which are the most prominent representatives of joy in human life, will be silenced due to the small number of such celebrations.

The Prophets and Marital Life

Like Yirmiyahu, we find several prophets whose married life and the birth of their children symbolize the content of their prophecies. Thus, for example, Hoshea is commanded (1:2-5):

(2) The Lord said to Hoshea: Go take to you a wife of harlotry, and children of harlotry; for the land has lewdly gone astray from the Lord. (3) So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Divlayim, who conceived and bore him a son. (4) And the Lord said to him: Call his name Yizre'el; for yet a little while, and I will visit the blood of Yizre'el upon the house of Yehu, and will bring the kingdom of the house of Israel to an end. (5) And it shall come to pass on that day, that I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Yizre'el.

Hosea was commanded to marry and have children, but in an unusual manner that reflects the problematic state of his people.

We find a similar phenomenon also by Yechezkel (24:18). Yechezkel is informed about the death of his wife, and he is ordered not to mourn and not to observe the mourning rituals:²

(15) And the word of the Lord came to me, saying: (16) Son of man, behold, I am about to take away from you **the delight of your eyes**

² In these verses and in the verses in *Yirmiyahu*, there is the highest concentration of the mention of mourning rites in Scripture, and it is from here that *Chazal* derived the various practices.

with the plague, yet you shall neither mourn nor weep, nor shall your tears run down. (17) Sigh in silence, make no mourning for the dead, bind on your turban, and put on your shoes upon your feet, and cover not your lips, nor eat the bread of men. (18) So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died; and I did in the morning as I was commanded.

Death by plague is a natural occurrence; the novelty in this prophecy lies in the order given to Yechezkel not to mourn his wife, the delight of his eyes. Here too a personal-familial event symbolizes the future – the calamity that will come upon the people:

(19) And the people said to me: Will you not tell us what these things mean to us that you do? (20) Then I answered them: The word of the Lord has come to me, saying: (21) Speak to the house of Israel: Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will profane My sanctuary, the pride of your strength, **the delight of your eyes**, and the longing of your soul; and your sons and your daughters whom you have left behind shall fall by the sword. (22) And you shall do as I have done: you shall not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men. (23) And your turbans shall remain upon your heads, and your shoes upon your feet; you shall neither mourn nor weep. But you shall pine away for your iniquities, and groan to one another. (24) Thus shall Yechezkel be a sign for you; according to all that he has done shall you do; and when this comes about, you shall know that I am the Lord God.

Rashi explains the reason for this command:

You shall not observe the mourning [rites], as there are no consolers among you, for there is not one among you who will not be a mourner, and there is mourning only in a place where there are consolers. Another explanation: That you will be afraid to weep before the Kasdim among whom you will be found.

In light of these imperatives, the order given to Yirmiyahu is striking in its uniqueness. As with Hoshea and Yechezkel, by Yirmiyahu as well the command is a negative sign of the calamity that will strike the people. But in contrast to Hoshea, by Yirmiyahu the matter is reflected not in marriage, but in abstaining from marriage. Yechezkel as well is commanded not to mourn after his wife dies. By Yirmiyahu, the command is to refrain from the outset from taking a wife and having children, as a sign of the impending calamity. This is the way the *midrash* explains a similar prohibition given to Noach:

When the world suffers distress and destruction, a person is forbidden to engage in procreation, so that the Holy One, blessed be He, should not be occupied with destruction, while he builds. Yosef too acted in this manner. Before the years of drought arrived, he had relations with his wife, as it is stated: "And to Yosef were born two sons" (*Bereishit* 41:50). When? "Before the years of famine came"... Noach too acted in this manner. When he entered the ark, it is written about him: "And

Noach went in, and his sons" (*Bereishit* 7:7), and afterwards: "And his wife, and the wives of his sons." And when he left [the ark], he was told: "Go out of the ark, you, and your wife, and your sons, and your sons' wives with you" (*Bereishit* 8:16). From here you learn that Noach and his sons were forbidden to engage in sexual relations. (*Midrash Tanchuma, Noach* 11)

It appears that in the context of Noach, the prohibition reflects a more serious matter – the loss of hope for a change in the decree. Starting a family expresses fundamental belief in a brighter future. Refraining from so doing indicates that there is no chance of better times, as the children will die in any event. With these actions, Yirmiyahu alludes to the terrible disaster that will come upon the people and the absence of any hope on the horizon.

Marriage in Yirmiyahu's Prophecy

Marriage and its dissolution play a significant symbolic role in the prophecies of Yirmiyahu and the other prophets. For example, at the beginning of his prophecy in chapter 2, the prophet uses the metaphor of fidelity and the love between husband and wife at the beginning of their marriage. At the beginning of chapter 3, Yirmiyahu mentions the *halakha* governing one who remarries his ex-wife to illustrate the state of the people and the connection between them and their God. In light of this, it might be suggested that the prohibition placed upon Yirmiyahu to marry carries an additional meaning. **It is a profound expression of the crisis in the covenant between Israel and God.** This is the way that God concludes His words: "For I have taken away My peace from this people, says the Lord, both love (*chesed*) and mercy." The absence of marriage and the family unit in a man's life is a state of incompleteness, lack of love and compassion, and the same is true of the relationship between the people of Israel and their God, who removes from them His covenant of peace, His love and kindness.³ Yirmiyahu himself draws a connection between kindness and love in the marital covenant (2:2): "I remember in your favor, the **devotion** [*chesed*] of your youth, your **love** as a bride."

On the other hand, in Yirmiyahu's prophecies of consolation we find once again the motif of family, this time in a positive sense (31:2): "The Lord appeared of old to me, saying: I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have remained true (*chesed*) to you." Similarly, the sounds of marriage celebrations that will be silenced as a sign of the destruction and the breaching of the covenant will be renewed in the future (33:10-11):

³ Thus, for example, Hoshea concludes his prophecy of consolation and repair, which is symbolized by the renewal of the covenant of marriage after the description of its dissolution at the beginning of his prophecy (2:21): "And I will betroth you to Me forever; and I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in judgment, **and in loyal love, and in mercies.** And I will betroth you to Me **in faithfulness**, and you shall know the Lord." See also *Yeshayahu* 54:10: "For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but **My faithful love** shall not depart from you, neither shall the covenant of **My peace** be removed, says the Lord, who has **mercy** on you."

(10) Thus says the Lord: Again there shall be heard in this place (which you say shall be desolate without man and without beast, namely, in the cities of Yehuda, and in the desolate streets of Jerusalem, that are without man, and without inhabitant, and without beast) (11) the voice of joy, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the voice of them that shall say: Praise the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for His loyal love endures forever; when they shall bring the sacrifice of thanksgiving into the house of the Lord. For I will cause the captivity of the land to return, as at the first, says the Lord.

This prophecy of consolation also draws a connection between a wedding celebration and the joyful sounds of the bride and bridegroom and the renewal of the covenant between Israel and God.

The Temptation to Prophecy

The absence of a wife and children in Yirmiyahu's life is connected to his fundamental loneliness as a prophet, his loneliness being more severe than that of any other prophet. In this section, we will examine Yirmiyahu's profound experience of loneliness, which is candidly revealed to us in his most difficult moments of crisis.

After Yirmiyahu's prophecy concerning the potter's bottle in chapter 19, which includes sharp words against the people and the Temple, Yirmiyahu receives in chapter 20 a harsh response from one of the priests who served as an official in the Temple:

(1) Now Pashchur the son of Immer the priest, who was also chief governor in the house of the Lord, heard that Yirmiyahu prophesied these things. (2) Then Pashchur smote Yirmiyahu the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the high gate of Binyamin, which was by the house of the Lord.

Yirmiyahu pays a heavy price for his prophecy; he is beaten and arrested by Pashchur the priest. But he does not break and he continues with his mission as soon as he is released:

(3) And it came to pass on the morrow that Pashchur brought Yirmiyahu out of the stocks. Then Yirmiyahu said to him: The Lord has called your name not Pashchur, but Magor Mi-Saviv (Terror all Around).

The harsh and courageous words that Yirmiyahu hurls at Pashchur reveal the prophet's resilience and strong personality. But these remarks, which are directed outwards, are immediately followed by completely different words that reveal what is taking place inside Yirmiyahu's heart. Here we hear about his difficult emotional experiences in the wake of his prophecy and its consequences:

(7) O Lord, You did persuade me, and I was persuaded; You are stronger than I, and have prevailed; I am in derision daily, every one mocks me. (8) For whenever I speak, I cry out aloud, I shout of violence and ruin; therefore the word of the Lord is made a reproach unto me, and a derision all the day. (9) Then I said: I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name. But His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones and I am weary with containing myself, and I cannot. (10) Though I heard the calumny of many, the terror all around; Denounce, and we will denounce him, say my familiar friends as they watch for my stumbling. Perhaps he will be persuaded, and we shall prevail against him, and we shall take our revenge on him. (11) But the Lord is with me as a mighty terrible one; therefore my persecutors shall stumble, and they shall not prevail; they shall be greatly ashamed, for they shall not prosper; their everlasting confusion shall never be forgotten. (12) But, O Lord of hosts, who tries the righteous, and sees the inward parts and the heart, let me see Your vengeance on them; for to You have I opened my cause. (13) Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord; for He has delivered the soul of the needy from the hand of evildoers.

In these verses, Yirmiyahu expresses in a most acute manner the duality in his personality with respect to the prophecy that was forced upon him and burns in his bones, and the great suffering that it causes him. The structure of the section reflects the prophet's complicated and ambivalent attitude toward God and prophecy, and the contradictory inclinations and feelings that run through him. He opens with words of complaint (7), and closes with words of praise and thanksgiving (13). On the one hand, the prophet cries out to God who tempted him into prophesying against his will and overpowered him with His strength, thus forcing him to become a prophet. (There is a sharp use of terms from the realm of rape and seduction.) He continues to describe the suffering caused him as a result. On the other hand, he praises and glorifies God, expressing thereby his joy in the intimate relationship that he has with God, and he describes here the power of God who protected him from his enemies, "as a mighty terrible one." At first, he describes the humiliation that took hold of him in the wake of his prophecy, "a reproach and a derision all the day." On the other hand, he describes the shame of his enemies as a result of the help that he receives from God, "their everlasting confusion shall never be forgotten." There is also a striking contrast regarding his attitude to God's might between verse 7, which describes how God overpowered him with prophecy, and verse 9, where God's power is directed at his opponents and protects him from them.

In verse 9, we encounter one of the strongest and most striking expressions of the experience of prophesying: "But His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones." What is the meaning of this powerful image? In the manner of imagery, it has multiple shades of meaning. Here we will discuss some of them. First, the fire may also reflect his dual attitude toward prophecy: It represents fierce enthusiasm along with the pain it causes the prophet. But the primary meaning of this image is evident from the parallelism between the role of the verb "*yachol*" here – "And I am weary with

containing myself, and **I can** (*ukhal*) not" - and in verse 7 – "You are stronger than I, **and have prevailed** (*va-tukhal*)." The Radak explains:

The word of God was in my heart like a burning fire that I should try with all my might to force out. Just as if a fire were shut up in my bones I would try to force it out with all my power, so too the word of God. *Nileti kalkel* – I am weary with containing myself and I cannot bear it within me, just as if it were a fire, and I am forced to spell it out with my lips and say it to them.

Prophecy is described here as the prophet's fate, from which there is no escape. Prophecy is forced upon Yirmiyahu and he has no choice but to utter it with his mouth, lest it burn him from the inside. The meaning of the image is clarified by the words of Yirmiyahu in one of the coming chapters (23:29): "Is not My word like a fire? says the Lord; and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" In that chapter, which we will study at length in one of the coming *shiurim*, Yirmiyahu struggles with the phenomenon of false prophets. Yirmiyahu uses this image to distinguish between two types of prophecies. Fire represents the intensity of the word of God, which cannot be compared to anything else, in contrast to the words of the false prophets. The intensity of the prophecy – like fire – is the criterion of truth.

Another meaning, which focuses on the threatening and dangerous aspect of fire, arises from the prophecy of calamity in chapter 5:

(12) They have belied the Lord, and said: It is not He; neither shall evil come upon us; neither shall we see sword or famine. (13) And the prophets shall become wind, and the word is not in them: thus shall it be done to them. (14) Wherefore thus says the Lord God of hosts: Because you speak this word, behold, I will make My words in your mouth fire, and this people wood, and it shall devour them.

Here the fire is the fire of punishment, which is liable to consume and destroy the nation, which is likened to trees.

Yirmiyahu's inner struggle and his complex attitude toward prophecy emerge also from his words in chapter 15:

(16) Your words were found, and I did eat them; Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart, for I am called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts. (17) 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.

The word of God fills Yirmiyahu with joy and gladness, as he is called by His name. At the same time, however, the hand of God isolates him and fills him with deep rage. Yirmiyahu feels ostracized from society, and he cannot sit and rejoice in the company of other people, owing to the heavy burden of prophecy and the calamity that is expected to arrive.

Cursed Be The Day On Which I Was Born” – Yirmiyahu Is Disgusted With His Life

In the continuation of his words, in chapter 20, verses 14-18, Yirmiyahu expresses his profound pain:

(14) Cursed be the day on which I was born; let not the day on which my mother bore me be blessed. (15) Cursed be the man who brought tidings to my father, saying: A man child is born to you, making him very glad. (16) And let that man be as the cities which the Lord overthrew, and repented not; and let him hear a cry in the morning, and an alarm at noontide; (17) because he slew me not from the womb; so that my mother might have been my grave, and her womb always great.⁴ (18) Why did I come out of the womb to see labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?

It is in these shocking verses that Yirmiyahu's existential crisis reaches its climax. He expresses himself with language that is almost unparalleled in its severity. He is totally disgusted with his life, which is filled with toil and sorrow, and he regrets emerging from his mother's womb into the light of day.

Yirmiyahu is depicted here in the image of Iyyov, the symbol of human anguish, who complains about his very life and existence in similar language and curses the day of his birth (3:1-4):

(1) After this, Iyyov opened his mouth, and cursed his day. (2) And Iyyov spoke and said: (3) Oh that the day had perished wherein I was born, and the night which said: There is a man child conceived. (4) Let that day be darkness; let not God inquire after it from above, nor let the light shine upon it.

It is worthwhile comparing Yirmiyahu's words in verses 17-19 to God's words at the beginning of his prophecy of consecration (1:5). In the prophecy of consecration, God says to Yirmiyahu (in contrast to most of the prophets who at some point are consecrated) that he was consecrated for prophecy already when he was in the womb, before he emerged into the world: "Before I formed you in the belly I knew you; and before you did come out of the womb I sanctified you." The connection to our prophecy is striking. Here Yirmiyahu complains about his emerging into the world to his difficult fate as a prophet. God seems to be hinting to him, precisely because he knew of the difficulties awaiting him as a prophet and his attempt not to accept the mission because of his concern (as he himself states later in the prophecy of consecration), that this is his destiny from which he has no escape, and this was fixed for him even before he emerged from the womb; he has no choice

⁴ According to the plain sense of the text, Yirmiyahu asks with these words (*harat olam*) to die as a fetus before leaving the womb, such that the pregnancy will turn into *harat olam*, an eternal pregnancy, in accordance with the usual meaning of the word *olam* in Scripture – in the sense of time. This expression entered into the Rosh Hashana liturgy in an entirely different sense – *ha-yom harat olam*. Here *olam* means the universe, and the phrase means that the today the universe was born.

but to accept the verdict. On the deeper level, this is not only chronological precedence, but rather it expresses an essential matter – prophecy preceded his life and established its very course.

To conclude and summarize the three *shiurim* dealing with the personal dimension of Yirmiyahu's prophecy, I wish to cite the words of M. Winfeld in his comprehensive article about the personality and teachings of Yirmiyahu:

It is paradoxical that the prophet who was designated to be a prophet from birth struggles more than any other prophet with his mission and tries to break free from it. He does not pass on the word of God as it was given to him. He examines the nature of his mission and even struggles with it. He does not accept prophecy as a matter that must not be doubted. On the contrary, he objects to prophesy, and demands an explanation: "Behold, the siege works are come to the city to take it... And you have said to me: O Lord God, Buy the field for money and take witnesses" (32:24-25). Moreover, he even rises up against God who sent him and says: "Right would you be, O Lord, if I were to contend with You; yet I will reason these points of justice with You" (12:1). He is like Iyyov, who also rises up against his Creator, saying: "Truly I know it is so, but how should a man be just before God?" (9:2); "For then I would speak, and not fear Him; for I am not so in myself" (9:35). Iyyov, like Yirmiyahu, recognizes God's might and greatness, but precisely for that reason, he wants to be honest with him. Regarding other points as well, there is a similarity between Iyyov and Yirmiyahu. Like Iyyov, Yirmiyahu curses the day on which he was born... Inside Yirmiyahu, a struggle takes place between the man and the prophet. The man in him is enraged by the prophet in him. As a prophet, he must fulfill his mission and prophesy prophecies of horror and outrage, but as a person his heart is sick over the breach of the daughter of his people. The prophet weeps over the destruction of his people, even though he is convinced that the destruction is justified and inevitable... We know of this internal struggle thanks to the prophet's monologues that have been preserved for us. Indeed, we have Yirmiyahu's lamentations, effusions, and personal confessions, whose very presence among his words of prophecy is puzzling... Until Yirmiyahu, we saw the prophets in their robes. That is, they are known to us only from their role as prophets and against the background of their national mission. In contrast, Yirmiyahu stands before us as a person, not only as a messenger. With the prophets, as with any person bearing some office, no importance is attached to personal experience or private feeling. The prophet is a messenger and his feeling neither adds nor detracts. In contrast, with Yirmiyahu, we hear the doubts that he raises with himself, with his family members, and even with his God. Cries and personal revenge in the prophetic literature, as we find with Yirmiyahu, amaze us. Yirmiyahu's deviation from the norm – that is, his reporting of his personal doubts, instead of only reporting his message in an objective manner – teaches us about his rebellion against accepted patterns, and indeed, this is what

characterizes Yirmiyahu in all of his activities – the struggle against convention, the protest against convention.

(Translated by David Strauss)