

THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU
Rav David Sabato

Shiur #12: The Personal Dimension of Yirmiyahu's Prophecy (Part II)

Introduction

In the previous *shiur*, we began to examine the personal dimension found in the first part of the book, which presents the complex and conflicted character of Yirmiyahu. We focused primarily on two areas: Yirmiyahu's sorrow for his people and his prayers on their behalf. In this *shiur*, we will continue this examination, focusing on other aspects of Yirmiyahu's life and tormented personality that arise in the book: the complicated relations between Yirmiyahu and his neighbors, the agony that he suffered as a result of his prophecies, and his resignation from and reappointment to prophecy.

The Prophet's Attitude Toward His People

Along with his intense love for his people, Yirmiyahu often expresses the disgust that he feels for them. The treachery and lies that characterize the nation discourage him to the point that he wants to abandon his people and seclude himself in the wilderness:

Oh, that I were in the wilderness, in a lodging place of wayfaring men; that I might leave my people, and go from them! For they are all adulterers, an assembly of treacherous men. (9:1)

Yirmiyahu continues to paint a devastating picture of the difficult situation prevailing among the people. Lies and deceit have become the norm, leading to a deep and basic mistrust between people who are closest to each other:

(2) And they bend their tongues, their bow of falsehood; but they are not valiant for the truth upon the earth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they know Me not, says the Lord. (3) Take heed everyone of his neighbor, and trust not in any brother; for every brother acts deceitfully, and every neighbor goes about with slanders. (4) And they deceive everyone his neighbor, and do not speak the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies, and weary themselves to commit iniquity.

Contending with the culture of lies and deceit is a theme that runs the entire length of the book, in different contexts.¹ At the heart of it all stands Yirmiyahu's struggle with the false prophets, who flourish naturally in the social climate described here.

The Prophet's Agony

At the beginning of the book, we learned about Yirmiyahu's hometown; he is from among the priests who were in Anatot. In chapter 11, it becomes clear that his relations with the people of Anatot were quite complex, apparently already in his early years as a prophet. In these verses, the prophet opens a window for us onto his tortured personal life, describing how he was persecuted by his family and neighbors in Anatot as a result of his prophecies. Yirmiyahu relates of their plots as follows:

(18) And the Lord has given me knowledge of it, and I know it; then You did show me their doings. (19) But I was like a gentle lamb brought to the slaughter; and I knew not that they had devised devices against me, saying: Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, and let us cut him off from the land of the living that his name may be no more remembered. (20) But, O Lord of hosts, who judges righteously, who tries the reins and the heart, let me see Your vengeance on them, for to You have I revealed my cause.

Yirmiyahu likens himself to a lamb being led unawares to slaughter. The people of Anatot had tried to kill him, and he was almost led to his death without even knowing it, in their attempts to erase his memory. Miraculously, the plot became known to Yirmiyahu and he was rescued from death. He demands justice in the form of revenge, and God's response was not late in coming. That response also clarifies what led to the attempt on his life:

(21) Therefore, thus says the Lord concerning the men of Anatot, who seek your life, saying: Prophecy not in the name of the Lord, that you die not by our hand. (22) Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, I will punish them: the young men shall die by the sword; their sons and their daughters shall die by famine. (23) And there shall be no remnant of them, for I will bring evil upon the men of Anatot, the year of their punishment.

It appears that Yirmiyahu began to deliver his prophecies of rebuke already in his village of Anatot, a matter which was like thorns in the eyes of its residents to the point that they threatened to kill him if he did not stop prophesying! Many of Yirmiyahu's prophecies criticize the priestly establishment in general, and especially its corruption in the Temple, and this angered the inhabitants of Anatot, the village of priests in which Yirmiyahu was raised.

¹ An interesting statistic will illustrate this: Of the sixty-three instances of the word *sheker*, lie, in the Torah and the Prophets, thirty-three are found in the book of *Yirmiyahu*.

In the next section (12:1-6), Yirmiyahu joins the leaders, prophets and psalmists who questioned the ways of God, wondering why the wicked prosper while the loyal servants of God are forced to suffer insults and affliction: "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are all they happy that deal very treacherously?" (1). It later turns out that this is not a theoretical question; it is directed at his enemies and persecutors. Yirmiyahu asks: "Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and prepare them for the day of slaughter" (3), measure for measure for their attempted slaughter of a "gentle lamb."

God responds to Yirmiyahu's argument with an *a fortiori* argument, which uses two parables:

(5) If you have run with the footmen and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses?
And do you feel secure in the land of peace? How will you do in the wild country of the Jordan?

The Radak explains:

I see you weak and weary from My mission, and you must strengthen yourself and your heart. For I see that you have run with footmen who are like you – namely, the people of Anatot, who are members of your family and on the same level as you in distinction. And they have wearied you and frightened you [with their threat] to kill you. How, then, can you contend with horses – when you go to Jerusalem where the great princes sit, and the king is there as well, how will you behave with them? You must strengthen yourself so that you not fear them and that you speak My message to them without dread. And He added further, saying: "And do you feel secure in the land of peace?" This means: You trust the people of Anatot, which should have been for you a land of peace... "How will you do in the wild country of the Jordan?" That is, in the place where the waves of the Jordan rise up high, this being a metaphor for the princes of Yehuda and Jerusalem.

God wishes to say that dealing with the people of Anatot was easy in comparison to the confrontation that awaits Yirmiyahu when he prophesies in Jerusalem and the Temple, where doubly powerful and dangerous opponents will stand up against him. The budding opposition and the attempted assassination at the beginning of his prophetic mission herald the great dangers and challenges that await him in the future and prepare him for them.

In fact, an allusion is made to the afflictions that he will suffer already in Yirmiyahu's prophecy of consecration in chapter 1:

(17) You therefore gird up your loins, and arise, and speak to them all that I command you; do not be dismayed at them, lest I dismay you before them. (18) For, behold, I have made you this day a fortified city, and an iron pillar, and walls of brass against the whole land, against the kings of Yehuda, against the princes, against its priests, and against the

people of the land. (19) And they shall fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you; for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you.

The tension between Yirmiyahu and his rivals reaches its climax in chapter 18:

(18) Then said they: Come and let us contrive devices against Yirmiyahu; for Torah shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, and let us smite him with the tongue, and let us not give heed to any of his words.

These comments followed the prophecy concerning the potter's house. In response to the threats of destruction, Yirmiyahu's opponents plot to silence him: "Then said they, **Come and let us contrive devices** [*ve-nachsheva machashavot*] **against Yirmiyahu.**"²

Note the people's attitude toward Yirmiyahu's prophecy. First, they set three different figures against Yirmiyahu: the priest, the wise man, and the prophet. In other words, his loss is not such a great loss, as there are sufficient alternative figures. Yirmiyahu himself struggles against these three authorities, and already in his early years he warns about their corruption and breach of trust: "**The priests** said not, Where is the Lord? and **those that handle the Torah** knew Me not; **the rulers** also transgressed against Me, and **the prophets** prophesied by the Ba'al, and walked after things that do not profit" (2:8). Yirmiyahu is the only person who bears the burden of truth in the face of the collapsing leadership. In fact, Yirmiyahu functions in his book not only as a prophet, but also as a sage, who deals with words of wisdom and helpful counsel, and also as a priest, who is involved in teaching Torah,³ as stated by the Malbim: "Yirmiyahu had three virtues, as he was a priest teaching instruction, and he was a sage to offer them wise counsel, and he was a prophet speaking the word of God."

The people, however, reject this truth and wish to return to the words of peace and reassurance of the current leaders. They scheme to "smite him with the tongue." What was their plan? One interpretation is reflected in the words of the Aramaic translation: "We will give false testimony against him." In other words, they wish to beat and kill him through their tongues – through false testimony. This interpretation is consistent with the general culture of deceit that surrounds Yirmiyahu, and now attempts also to kill him. M. Bula, in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary, offers another explanation, according to which smiting him with the tongue is clarified in the next verse: "And let us not give heed to any of his words." In other words, the best way to hurt Yirmiyahu is to hurt him in his tongue – and to completely ignore his prophecies.

² The word *machshava* in Biblical Hebrew refers to a plan or plot that a person wishes to execute. See, for example, *Shemot* 31:4: "To contrive works of art [*la-chashov machshavot*], to work in gold and in silver."

³ In many places in the book, we see Yirmiyahu's connection to the wisdom literature, on the one hand, and the world of Halakha, on the other.

There is an interesting connection between their words and the prophecy of Yirmiyahu itself: "Behold, I frame evil against you **and devise a device against you**; return now everyone from his evil way, and amend your ways and your doings" (18). At first glance, we are dealing with measure for measure, but in truth there is a big difference between the two contexts. The threatened calamity in Yirmiyahu's prophecy is conditional, and its purpose is to bring the people to repent: "Return now everyone from his evil way." In fact this is the primary lesson of the prophecy concerning the potter's house. In contrast, Yirmiyahu's enemies are planning to kill him, as he is perceived by them as an absolute enemy who wishes them harm. This point is underscored in Yirmiyahu's response:

(19) Give heed to me, O Lord, and hearken to the voice of those that contend with me. (20) Shall evil be recompensed for good? For they have dug a pit for my soul. Remember that I stood before You to speak good for them and to turn away Your wrath from them. (21) Therefore, deliver up their children to the famine, and pour out their blood by the sword; and let their wives be bereaved of their children and be widows; and let their men be put to death; let their young men be slain by the sword in battle. (22) Let a cry be heard from their houses, when you shall bring a troop suddenly upon them; for they have dug a pit to take me, and hid snares for my feet. (23) Yet, Lord, You know all their counsel against me to slay me; forgive not their iniquity, neither blot out this sin from Your sight, but let them be overthrown before You; deal thus with them in the time of Your anger.

Yirmiyahu turns to God demanding justice.⁴ He presents the actions of his enemies as evil recompensed for good, as God remembers Yirmiyahu's heroic efforts to protect the people through his prayer, and He knows that Yirmiyahu sought only good for his people. Even his prophecies of destruction were only intended to save the people from them!

In chapter 17, we hear another accusation being leveled against Yirmiyahu:

(15) Behold, they say to me: Where is the word of the Lord? Let it come now.

Besides the tone of mockery and irony that can be heard in the people's words to Yirmiyahu, a sharper claim can be detected here. In fact, these words raise doubts about the credibility of Yirmiyahu's prophecy. The people argue that Yirmiyahu's prophecy is not being fulfilled, and thus it should not be accepted as a true prophecy. Note the wording, "Where is the **word of the Lord** (*devar Hashem*)? **Let it come** (*yavo*)," which is taken from the passage dealing with the prophet in *Devarim* 18:

⁴ Corresponding to the people's words, "And let us not give heed to any of his words," Yirmiyahu says, "Give heed to me, O Lord, and hearken to the voice of those that contend with me."

(21) And if you say in your heart: How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken? (22) Know that when a prophet **speaks** (*yedaber*) **in the name of the Lord** (*be-shem Hashem*), if **the thing** (*ha-davar*) follow not, nor **come to pass** (*yavo*), that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken, but the prophet has spoken it out of presumption; you shall not be afraid of him.

Yirmiyahu is presented here, then, as a false prophet! As we will see later in the book, Yirmiyahu himself levels a similar charge against the false prophet Chananya the son of Azur, and cites the same verses against him (28:8-9):

(8) The prophets that have been before me and before you of old prophesied both against many countries, and against great kingdoms, of war, and of evil, and of pestilence. (9) As for the prophet who prophesies for peace, **when the word of that prophet shall come to pass**, then shall it be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.

In the wake of this difficult accusation, Yirmiyahu turns to God, saying:

(16) As for me, I did not hasten to be a shepherd to follow you, neither have I desired the woeful day; You know that which came out of my lips was before You. (17) Be not a terror to me; You are my hope in the day of evil. (18) Let them be confounded that persecute me, but let me not be confounded; let them be dismayed, but let me not be dismayed; bring upon them the day of evil and destroy them with double destruction.

Countering the charge brought by the people, Yirmiyahu responds that he never asked to be prophet, as indeed follows from the prophecy concerning his consecration. On the contrary, he asked to remain a shepherd. Even "the day of evil," that is, the prophecy of calamity, is not part of Yirmiyahu's desires. Moreover, as we have seen, he suffers when he receives the prophecy and when he delivers it. The truth is the very opposite of the suspicion of the people; Yirmiyahu is not happy about the nation's downfall, but is in fact distressed by their sorrow and seeks only their good.

Here another dimension of Yirmiyahu's personal tragedy reveals itself: Yirmiyahu's twofold roles and identities – his being a member of his people and his mission as a prophet – not only cause a profound mental crisis, but also create a severe disconnect between him and the people. A false image is created of him as enemy of the people who seeks their harm, when there is nothing further from Yirmiyahu's true goal. The tragedy deepens in light of the fact that he is unable to express his sorrow to the people, and he must stand before them as God's agent who rebukes the people and threatens them with calamity. Only on the inside can Yirmiyahu suffer and identify with his people. For this reason, God alone knows the truth: "You know that which came out of my lips was before You."

At the end of his words, Yirmiyahu turns to God with a supplication to protect him in his time of trouble: "Be not **a terror** (*li-mechita*) to me... Let

them **be dismayed** (*yechatu*), but let me not **be dismayed** (*echatah*)." With these words, Yirmiyahu brings to mind his prophecy of consecration: "Do not **be dismayed** (*techat*) at them, lest I **dismay** (*achitkha*) you before them" (1:17). Yirmiyahu mentions the promise that he received at the beginning of his mission that he would be protected from such accusations if he accepts upon himself the dangers of his mission.

Yirmiyahu Resigns and is Reappointed

The hatred and anger that Yirmiyahu is forced to bear in his encounter with the people, along with his failure to rescue them with his prayers in chapter 14, bring him in chapter 15 to a severe crisis and a sharp complaint about his mission as a prophet:

(10) Woe is me, my mother, that you have born me a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth! I have neither lent, nor have men lent to me; yet every one of them curses me.

Yirmiyahu laments his bitter fate, and regrets his very existence; everyone contends with him and he contends with everyone owing to his prophecies. With these words, Yirmiyahu expresses his helplessness in the face of the insults and humiliations that he suffers at the hands of the people, for no wrongdoing on his part, as "he neither lent, nor have men lent to him." The dispute does not have a monetary background.

In response, God reassures him with two promises:

(11) The Lord said: **Have I not** provided for your welfare (*sheritikha*); **have I not** made the enemy entreat your intercession, in the time of evil and in the time of affliction.

(12) Shall iron break iron from the north, and brass?

God promises Yirmiyahu a happy ending, as opposed to the curses leveled at him.⁵ In the end, when the calamity will strike, his enemies who now

⁵ The word *sheritikha* is difficult, and the commentaries disagree about its meaning. Rashi brings a disagreement between two of the great medieval grammarians – Menachem Ibn Saruk and Dunash ben Labrat: "*Sheritikha* – I left you, from the word *she'erit*, remnant. This is the way Menachem explained the word. But Dunash explained it in the sense of *hatara*, release, as in '*u-meshare kitrin*,' resolve problems (*Daniel* 5:12). And this is the meaning of *sheritikha*, as it is stated: 'Behold, I release you this day from the chains' (*Yirmiyahu* 40:4), that is, the day that God fulfilled His word, he was told: 'And now, behold, I release you this day from the chains which were upon your hand. If it seem good to you to come with Me into Bavel, come.'" According to Menachem, *sheritikha* is derived from the root *she'erit*, and the *alef* was omitted because of the successive gutturals. The Radak brings an example of this phenomenon from I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 12:39: "And all the rest (*sherit*, without an *alef*) also of Israel." According to this, the verse means that Yirmiyahu's end will be good. In contrast, Dunash explains that the word is derived from the Aramaic root *shari*, meaning release. According to him, there is an allusion here to Yirmiyahu's future release from chains. However, it is possible that there is a reference here to the curse mentioned by Yirmiyahu – interpreting it in a positive manner, and turning it from a curse into a blessing. It should be noted that according to the way that the word is written, *sarotikha*, from the root *saror*, God is promising Yirmiyahu to strengthen him. See *Da'at Mikra* commentary ad loc.

curse him will have to come and beg him to pray on their behalf and protect them. God also likens Yirmiyahu to iron and brass which come from the north and which cannot be broken. These words echo what was stated in the prophecy of consecration: "Behold, I have made you this day a fortified city, and an **iron** pillar, and walls of **brass** against the whole land" (1:18). In this way, God reminds him of the promise of protection that he received at the very beginning of his mission.

But this does not satisfy Yirmiyahu, and he continues to complain:

(15) O Lord, You know: remember me, and be mindful of me, and revenge me of my persecutors; take me not away in Your long suffering; know that for Your sake I have suffered insult. (16) Your words were found, and I did eat them; and 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.

After asking for revenge in verse 15, Yirmiyahu describes in verses 16-17 two jarring and contradictory experiences that he had in the wake of becoming God's prophet. On the one hand, he experienced special joy upon receiving the word of God, but on the other hand, there was a traumatic effect that this had on his situation as a person and on his relationship with the surrounding society.⁶

Yirmiyahu concludes his words with a complaint about his terrible pain and impossible situation, and he even casts reproach against God:

(18) 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 is disappointed by God's attitude toward him; he feels abandoned and forsaken. These difficult words echo Iyov's afflictions and the words that he hurled at his friends (6:15): "My brethren have dealt deceitfully like a wadi, and like the water courses that disappear."⁷

In light of God's response, it turns out that Yirmiyahu's remarks contain another matter:

(19) 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 the vile, you shall be as My mouth;
let them return to you, but return not you to them.

⁶ We will deal in the next *shiur* with Yirmiyahu's deep sense of loneliness and the loneliness of the prophets in general.

⁷ There are many parallels between Iyov and Yirmiyahu. We will deal with them as well in the next *shiur*.

(20) 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.

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

God's words in verse 20 parallel what He said to Yirmiyahu in his prophecy of consecration (1:18), confirming the promises of protection in response to his fears. But it stands to reason that the repetition of the consecration prophecy expresses something else: It teaches that there is here a sort of renewed consecration. It seems that God saw the words of Yirmiyahu as a sort of resignation from his mission, and He encourages him to return to his mission: "If you return, then will I bring you back, and you shall stand before Me."⁸

Attention should also be paid to the addition found here to the first prophecy of consecration: "And if you bring out the precious from the vile, you shall be as My mouth." The Radak explains this as follows:

If you trouble yourself about them and get them to repent, and bring out the precious from the vile, causing the wicked who are vile to return and become good and precious, you shall be as My mouth – that which you decree and say will come true, as if I had said it, as it is stated with regard to the prophet Shmuel: "And He did let none of his words fall to the ground." It seems that God is presenting Yirmiyahu with the optimistic side of prophecy – not only contention and strife with his people, but also the possibility of extracting the good from them. Yirmiyahu's return will allow him to return the people to God, for the primary purpose of a prophet, who serves as God's mouthpiece, is repair, distilling the good from the evil.

(Translated by David Strauss)

⁸ The phrase, "You shall stand before Me," with respect to a prophet indicates his role as God's messenger. See above, v. 1, and I *Melakhim* 17:1.