

**THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU**  
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**Shiur #23: The Prophecy Concerning the Descendants of Rekhav  
(Chapter 35)**

**Introduction**

Chapter 35 includes an exceptional prophecy that is addressed to a particular family, in the course of which we meet the unique world and culture of that family – the family of the descendants of Rekhav. When the Babylonian army goes up against Jerusalem in the days of Yehoyakim, Yirmiyahu is commanded to perform an action that will show the people their sins. Yirmiyahu must go to the family of the Rekhavim, a family of nomads that fled to Jerusalem out of fear for their lives, and give them wine to drink. The Rekhavim pass the test and refuse to drink, revealing to Yirmiyahu that the family patriarch, Yonadav son of Rekhav, who lived two hundred and fifty years earlier, had imposed bans on the family against settling in a particular place and drinking wine. The treachery of the people of Israel, who transgress God's commandments, stands out against the background of the absolute fidelity of the Rekhavim and their consistent adherence to their forefather's command.

From this perspective, our chapter is a conceptual continuation of the prophecy in the previous chapter, which also dealt with the people's failure to obey God's commands regarding the freeing of slaves and their violation of the covenant. In this *shiur*, we will examine the world and perceptions of the family of the Rekhavim, as well as the significance of their turning into a model for imitation among the people of Israel.

Together with the previous chapter, this prophecy is located between the collection of prophecies of consolation and the narrative-historical section of the book. The Abravanel points to a connection between the two matters – the people's failure to observe the *mitzvot*. Later in the *shiur*, we will point to another connection.

The prophecy is comprised of two parts. The first part [1-11] includes the command and its execution – the "parable." The second part [12-19] consists of the "moral" and the lesson for the people of Israel.

**The Command and the Refusal**

At the beginning of the chapter, Yirmiyahu is commanded to bring the descendants of Rekhav to the house of the Lord and there to give them wine to drink:

- (1) The word which came to Yirmiyahu from the Lord in the days of Yehoyakim the son of Yoshiyahu king of Yehuda, saying:
- (2) Go to the house of the Rekhavim, and speak to them, and bring them into the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers, and give them wine to drink.
- (3) Then I took Ya'azanya the son of Yirmiyahu, the son of Chavatzina, and his brothers, and all his sons, and the whole house of the Rekhavim,
- (4) and I brought them into the house of the Lord, into the chamber of the sons of Chanan, the son of Yigdalyahu, a man of God, which was by the chamber of the princes, which was above the chamber of Ma'aseyahu the son of Shalum, the keeper of the door.
- (5) And I set before the sons of the house of the Rekhavim goblets full of wine and cups, and I said to them, "Drink wine."

The text spells out how Yirmiyahu brought the Rekhavim to the chamber and its precise location. Perhaps this is meant to illustrate the force of the command – through a prophet of God and in the house of the Lord.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the stubborn refusal of the descendants of Rekhav stands out. It is also possible that Yirmiyahu wishes to display the refusal of the sons of Rekhav before the princes found in the Temple: "Which was by the chamber of the princes."<sup>2</sup>

Yirmiyahu's command in the Temple is met by an unequivocal refusal on the part of the descendants of Rekhav, which is accompanied by a detailed explanation:

- (6) But they said, "We will drink no wine. For Yonadav the son of Rekhav our father commanded us, saying: You shall drink no wine, neither you, nor your sons forever.
- (7) Neither shall you build a house, nor sow seed, nor plant a vineyard, nor have one; but all your days you shall dwell in tents, that you may live many days in the land where you sojourn.
- (8) And we have obeyed the voice of Yonadav the son of Rekhav our father in all that he charged us to drink no wine all our days, we, our wives, our sons, and our daughters;
- (9) nor to build houses for us to dwell in, nether have we vineyard, nor field, nor seed:
- (10) **but we have dwelt in tents**, and have obeyed, and done according to all that Yonadav our father commanded us.

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<sup>1</sup> He brings them to the chamber of the sons of Chanan son of Yigdalyahu, a man of God. These were apparently disciples of the prophet, "the sons of the prophets." Perhaps they were included among Yirmeyahu's supporters.

<sup>2</sup> "Ma'aseyahu the son of Shalum, the keeper of the door" is not mentioned anywhere else, but it is possible that Tzefanya the son of Ma'aseyahu, who is mentioned in chapter 29 as one of the officials in the Temple who supported Yirmeyahu, is his son.

(11) But it came to pass, when Nevukhadnetzar king of Bavel came up into the land that we said: Come, and let us go to Jerusalem for fear of the army of the Kasdim, and for fear of the army of Aram; **so we dwell at Jerusalem.**"

The refusal of the Rekhavim opens a window for us onto the unique world of this family. It turns out that the prohibition of drinking wine is only one of the prohibitions that had been imposed upon them by the family's patriarch, Yonadav. The patriarch's commands can be divided into two: (1) A prohibition against drinking wine; and (2) a prohibition against settling down in one place, which includes a ban on building a house, sowing seed, and planting a vineyard. This division is supported by stylistic considerations: "You shall drink no wine... forever. Neither shall you build a house, nor sow seed... all your days."<sup>3</sup> In the second part of their words, they describe the fulfillment of the command in a precise manner, and why in the end they violated the command and entered the city – for lack of choice, owing to the mortal danger facing those who would remain outside the city when the army of the Kasdim went up against Jerusalem. Until now, "We have dwelt in tents"; and now, for lack of choice, "So we dwelt in Jerusalem."

### **The Meaning of the Prohibitions**

What is the rationale for the prohibitions imposed by Yonadav the son of Rekhav? In order to understand this, we must examine the common denominator of the prohibitions. The Radak suggests one possibility:

"That you may live many days" – Because houses, fields, and vineyards keep a person in his place, be there famine or the sword, and he will die early out of worry. And when he does not have these things in his place, as long as he sees good in that place, he will remain there, but when he sees that it is bad, he will go somewhere else where it is good for him. Therefore, he commanded them that they should be tent dwellers, and go from place to place, as they see what it is good in each place, a house, a field, or a vineyard, and they will live long lives because of this. And thus we see among the patriarchs that they would move from place to place with their tents because of famine.

According to the Radak, we are dealing with a nomadic outlook that maintains that settling down and gaining a hold on the land is a dangerous way of life that does not allow for long life, because it fixes a person in his place and does not enable flexibility in times of crisis and distress. It is precisely a nomadic way of life that allows a person to move from place to place with relative ease because his livelihood does not depend upon a particular place. If people adopt this way of life, then "they will live many days on the land."

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to the pause created by the words "forever" and "all your days," there is a stylistic difference in the word order of each verse: "You shall not drink wine" / "A house you shall not build."

However, the prohibition against drinking wine does not fit in with this interpretation, because there is no clear connection between it and a nomadic outlook. Perhaps this also reflects the idea that immersing oneself in wine, which symbolizes the pleasures of this world, impairs survival. This is what the Radak writes later in his commentary:

As for drinking wine, which he prohibited to them, it is known that it drives one who errs with it mad, as it is stated: "Whoever is misled thereby is not wise" (*Mishlei* 2:1); and it is written: "Who cries, Woe? Who cries, Alas? Who has quarrels? Who has complaints? Who has causeless injuries? Who has redness of eyes? They who tarry long at the wine" (*Mishlei* 23:29). And the reason for the exile of the ten tribes was the excessive drinking of wine, as it is stated: "Woe to the crown of pride of the drunkards Efrayim" (*Yeshayahu* 28:1); and it says: "Woe to them that are mighty to drink wine" (*Yeshayahu* 5:22); and it says: "Wo to them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink" (*Yeshayahu* 5:11). And also regarding Yehuda and Binyamin the reason for their exile was drinking, as it is written: "But they also reel through wine" (*Yeshayahu* 28:7), and the entire passage as it is written. And the first person who drank wine, even though he was righteous and perfect, became drunk with it and was humiliated through it.

According to this explanation, this is the way we must understand the second half of the chapter: The descendants of Rekhav symbolize absolute adherence to the ancient ancestral command. This is a lesson for Israel, by way of an *a fortiori* argument, that they must keep God's commands. However, this explanation does not account for why the sons of Rekhav merit such an extreme Divine promise at the end of the chapter: "Because you have obeyed the commandment of Yonadav your father, and kept all his precepts... therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Yonadav the son of Rekhav shall not lack a man to stand before Me forever" (vv. 18-19). Surely all they did was obey their father's instructions!<sup>4</sup>

It seems therefore that these prohibitions are rooted in a deeper point. The prohibition against settling down might not stem from a nomadic perception, but rather from experience that teaches that settling down leads by necessity to idol worship, as the book of *Devarim* warns many times in anticipation of Israel's entry into the land (*Devarim* 8):

(7) For the Lord your God brings you into a good land, a land of water courses, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; (8) a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil, and honey; (9) a land in which you shall eat bread without scarceness, you shall not lack any thing in it; a land the stones of which are iron, and out of whose hills you may dig

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<sup>4</sup> An explanation in another direction is offered by the *Sifrei, Bamidbar, Beha'alotekha* 78, according to which we are dealing with mourning customs – "Since this Temple will eventually be destroyed, we see it now as if it were already destroyed."

brass. (10) When you have eaten and are replete, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you. (11) Beware that you forget not the Lord your God, in not keeping His commandments, and His judgments, and His statutes, which I command you this day; (12) lest when you have eaten and are replete, and have built goodly houses, and dwelt in them; (13) and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; (14) then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

Settling the land involves a great blessing, as it is a "good land." The danger stems precisely from its goodness, its produce and vineyards – "When you have eaten and are replete... and you have built goodly houses." And the result: "Then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God." In contrast to the good of the land, the Torah describes nomadic life in the wilderness: "Who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were venomous serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; who brought forth water for you out of the rock of flint; who fed you in the wilderness with manna..." (vv. 15-16). During this period, the people could not forget God, for He was with them at every moment.

But there is another concern – not only forgetting God but falling into idol worship. Idol worship was closely linked to agricultural life. Farmers whose lives were dependent on the seasons of the year and on the forces of nature deified these forces and worshipped them. Another proof for this understanding arises from the parallelism between the words of Yonadav and the words of God to the people later in the chapter. Yonadav tells his sons that the reason for the commands is "**That you may live many days in the land** where you sojourn." In similar fashion, God says to the people: "And go not after other gods to serve them, **and then you shall dwell in the land which I have given to you and to your fathers**" (v. 15). From here we see that long life on the land is not merely the result of living the flexible life of a nomad, but rather the consequence of a spiritual state and the maintenance of fidelity to God.

This also follows from the parallelism between these verses and the verses in the book of *Devarim* (11) in the *Shema* passage: "Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and you turn aside, **and serve other gods**, and worship them; and then the Lord's anger be inflamed against you, and He shut up the heavens, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not its fruit; and you perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord gives you... **that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers** to give them, as the days of heaven upon the earth." Here and in other places in the book of *Devarim*, the Torah is concerned about the dangers of agricultural life in the land of Israel, the chief of which is immersion in idolatry, which will lead to the removal of the people from their land.

Yonadav also warns his children about these dangers. The command is primarily intended to prevent falling into pagan practices that will lead to exile from the land. But in contrast to the Torah, which obligates settlement of the land and simultaneously warns of the accompanying dangers, Yonadav forbids his sons to settle down in the land so as not to come to this dangerous test.

The idea of returning to the wilderness as a way of contending with the dangers of idolatry appears also in the words of the prophet Hoshea (chap. 2):

(16) Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. (17) And I will give her vineyards from there, and the valley of Akhor (Troubling) for a Gate of Hope; and she shall respond there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the days when she came up out of the land of Egypt. (18) And it shall be on that day, says the Lord, that you shall say, Ishi [my Husband]; and shall no more say to Me, Ba'ali [my Master]. (19) For I will take away the names of the Be'alim out of her mouth, and they shall no more be mentioned by their name.

In this light we can re-interpret the prohibition against drinking wine. Yonadav forbade the drinking of wine not only for utilitarian motives, but because of the moral and religious dimension of the practice – the corruption that it brings upon those who indulge in it. There is a clear connection between the prohibition of planting a vineyard and the prohibition of drinking wine. The Radak noted the connection to the story of Noach, who planted a vineyard as his first agricultural act in the new world after the flood, which in the end led to sin, humiliation, and curse. The verses brought by the Radak from the book of *Yeshayahu* which speak in condemnation of drunkenness in the kingdom of Israel also present wine as a factor that causes moral and social corruption in a wealthy, hedonistic, and corrupt agricultural society.<sup>5</sup>

### **Who Was Yonadav the Son of Rekhav?**

The interpretation proposed above concerning Yonadav's command to his descendants is reinforced by the sole mention of Yonadav in the Bible, in a short story in II *Melakhim* (10:15-17). Between the mass killing campaigns of Yehu son of Nimshi in the kingdom of Israel, mention is made of a brief encounter between Yehu and Yonadav the son of Rekhav:

(15) And when he was departed from there, he came across Yehonadav the son of Rekhav coming to meet him. And he greeted him, and said to him, "Is your heart right, as my heart is with your heart?" And Yehonadav answered, "It is." "If it be," said Yehu, "give me your hand." And he gave him his hand; and he took him up to him into the chariot. (16) And he said, "Come with me, and see my zeal for the Lord." So they made him ride in his chariot.

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<sup>5</sup> With the prohibition against drinking wine, the sons of Rekhav are similar to nazirites, who abstain from wine in order to sanctify themselves for the service of God.

Why does Yehu seek to make Yonadav ride in his chariot, and what is the meaning of this brief conversation? Yehu was chosen for the monarchy in order to fight against the house of Ach'av and to eradicate the worship of the Ba'al and the Ashera from the country. Before killing the priests of the Ba'al, Yehu meets with Yehonadav and invites him to see his zeal for God and join him in wiping out idolatry from Israel.

The expression, "Is your heart right," relates apparently to his absolute adherence to the worship of the God of Israel.<sup>6</sup> It stands to reason that Yonadav was in his day a symbol of the struggle against idolatry and zealotry for God, and therefore Yehu wished to have join Yonadav him.<sup>7</sup> This story clarifies the background to Yonadav's command to his descendants, which apparently stemmed from his struggle against the penetration of the worship of the Ba'al and the Ashera into the kingdom of Israel.<sup>8</sup>

### **God's Command and the Command of the Fathers**

Thus, we have found a deep connection between Yonadav's commands to his descendants, which succeeded, and God's rebuke of the nation, which failed – moving away from the life of idolatry. However, in God's words to the people we find a parallel not only regarding the content of the command, but also regarding the obedience to it, for the sons of Yonadav listen to their father and fulfill his wishes, whereas the people of Israel do not obey God:

(13) Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Go and tell the men of Yehuda and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Will you not receive instruction to hearken to My words? says the Lord. (14) **The words of Yonadav the son of Rekhav**, that he commanded his sons not to drink wine, have been kept, for to this day they drink none, **but obey their father's commandment**; yet I have spoken to you, from morning till night; **but you did not hearken to Me...** (16) **For the sons of Yonadav the son of Rekhav** have kept the commandment of their

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, I *Melakhim* 14:8: "And yet you have not been as My servant David, who kept My commandments and who followed Me with all **his heart**, to do that only which was **right** before You."

<sup>7</sup> His zealous character reveals itself in his participation in the killing of the prophets of the Ba'al, and it fits in with his radical commands to his sons to totally detach themselves from civilization. It is possible that this commandment is also connected to the nature of the change in the days of Ach'av, as was noted by Sh. Abromski: "Precisely in the days of the house of Omri, when Israel was influenced by the urban-mercantile Phoenician culture, there was room for such a family taking hold on the edge of the wilderness, while withdrawing from permanent settlements."

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note the play on the word Rekhav in this section. Yehonadav is the son of Rekhav (*Rekhav*), and Ach'av blesses him (*mevarkheihu*). Afterwards he brings him up on his chariot (*markeva*), and makes him ride (*markiv*) in his chariot (*be-rikhvo*). In light of what is described in our chapter, there is an interesting tension here between Yehonadav the nomad, who distances himself from developed civilization, and the king who makes him ride in his chariot, which represents the peak of military technology.

father, which he commanded them; **but this people has not hearkened to me.**

Moreover, following the prophecy, the sons of Rekhav receive a great promise:

(18) Because you have obeyed the commandment of Yonadav your father, and kept all his precepts, and done according to all that he has commanded you, (19) therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Yonadav the son of Rekhav shall not lack a man to stand before me forever.

This promise parallels two other promises that were given at the end of chapter 33, regarding the kingdom of the house of David and the priestly dynasty that will not cease from standing before God, and it therefore puts the descendants of Rekhav in an especially "VIP" group.

But still there is a significant difference between the parable and the moral, because compliance with the commands of the forefather is different than compliance with the commands of God. It seems that we are dealing with two different sources of authority. What, then, is the great praise for the sons of Yonadav, who obey their father's commands?

It might be suggested that an allusion is made here to the image of the relationship between God and Israel as the relationship between father and son. If we find such obedience to one's biological father, all the more so should we find it in connection with one's Divine father.

We find that the commandments of the patriarchs have a strong place in the commitment to Torah and *mitzvot* in general. The special status of such commands is already evident in the first *mitzva* fulfilled by the children of Israel in the book of *Bereishit* – the *mitzva* of *gid ha-nasheh* (*Bereishit* 32:33):

Therefore, the children of Israel eat not the sinew of the vein, which is upon the hollow of the thigh, to this day, because he touched the hollow of Yaakov's thigh in the sinew of the vein.

The verse does not state that God forbade the people to eat the *gid ha-nasheh*. What, then, is the source of the authority of this prohibition?

The Riva, one of the Tosafists, explains as follows (ad loc.): "'Therefore the children of Israel eat not of the sinew of the vein' – that is to say, as a remembrance of the miracle through which Yaakov was saved from the angel. Another explanation: Therefore, because Yaakov was injured, **his sons accepted upon themselves** not to eat of the *gid ha-nasheh*. This may be likened to a person who always has a headache and he accepts upon himself never again to eat of the head so that it should be a cure for him." The Radak offers a similar explanation: "'Therefore the children of Israel eat not' – the children of Yaakov forbade it to themselves in honor of their father who was stricken there, and they commanded to their children **like the commandment**



**given by Yehonadav ben Rekhav to his sons that they should not drink wine,** and it was forbidden to them and to their children and to their children's children forever...." It turns out that the first commandment that the people of Israel fulfilled as a people was founded upon a commitment undertaken by the patriarchs, and the Radak even likens this to the incident involving the sons of Rekhav!<sup>9</sup>

R. Kook emphasizes the centrality of what was accepted by the patriarchs and the nation of Israel's commitment to Halakha:

... Actual apostasy, transgressing the words of the Torah and the words of the Rabbis and breaching the fences of old, are not necessary for leaving the heritage of the fathers... Know that this is true, for we surely observe with love the customs of Israel which we know we were not commanded by way of prophecy... **And similarly all of the *mitzvot* of the Sages that we fulfill, their main foundation is the acceptance of "the people as a whole"...** And even though "the Rabbis connected it to [the prohibition] of 'You shall not turn aside,' nevertheless its clear foundation is the acceptance of the nation... Many thought that the main foundation of the Oral Law is just what was accepted by the nation from the greatness and sanctity of the people... But they did not know that the great value of *Chazal* and their elevated status is something true in itself... **But the foundation that will exist forever is only the acceptance of the people across the generations in the ways of its life...** (*Eder Ha-Yakar*, pp. 38-39)

(Translated by David Strauss)

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<sup>9</sup> For a broad discussion of this idea, see D. Henshke, "*Mitzvot He-Avot U-Mitzvot Sinai: Parashat Gid Ha-Nasheh Ke-Perek Bi-Tefisat Ha-Halakha shel Ha-Rambam*," *Mi-Birkhat Moshe: Kovetz Ma'amarim Be-Mishnat Ha-Rambam Le-Khevodo shel Ha-Rav Nachum Eliezer Rabinowitz* (Ma'aleh Adumim, 5772), pp. 619-646. The discussion concerning *gid ha-nasheh* is connected to a larger question that arises in the *mishna* in *Chullin* in the disagreement between R. Yehuda and the Sages as to the time of these verses – whether they were stated at Sinai or in the time implied in their context.