

THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU
Rav David Sabato

Shiur #26: The Last Days of Jerusalem – Part II (Chapter 38)

Introduction

Chapter 38 takes place at the very height of the second Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, which ended with the conquest and destruction of the city. Even at these moments, Yirmiyahu continues to deliver his prophecies in an attempt to persuade the people of Jerusalem to surrender to the Babylonians (1-3). As in the previous chapter, Yirmiyahu is once again accused of treason and weakening the hearts of the people, and he is punished by being cast into a mire-filled pit. In what might have been the final moments of his life, Yirmiyahu is saved from drowning by virtue of Eved-Melekh the Kushi. The second part of the chapter offers an account of another meeting between Tzidkiyahu and Yirmiyahu, in which the prophet tries one last time to convince the king to change his mind and give up. However, the king's fears outweigh his recognition of the truth of Yirmiyahu's words, and he continues with his rebellion until the city is finally destroyed.

We will first study the chapter in its immediate context. We will then compare it to chapter 37, which is similar to it in many of its details, and finally we will compare the story of Yirmiyahu here to the story of Yosef.

Yirmiyahu's Prophecy and His Being Cast into the Pit

(1) Then Shefatya the son of Mattan, and Gedalyahu the son of Pashchur, and Yukhal the son of Shelemyahu, and Paschur the son of Malkiya heard the words that Yirmiyahu had spoken to the people, saying,:(2) Thus says the Lord: He that remains in this city shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence; but he that goes over to the Kasdim shall live; for he shall have his life for a prey, and he shall live. (3) Thus says the Lord: This city shall surely be given into the hand of the army of the king of Bavel, who shall take it.

The chapter opens with a difficult prophecy of Yirmiyahu to the people, which is delivered in the presence of the princes of Yehuda. Yirmiyahu holds fast to his prophecy concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, but he now goes even further and preaches to the people that they should go out to the Kasdim and surrender. He presents them with two options: die in the city or live outside it. Though Yirmiyahu had already said similar things in the past (21:8-9), there they were said only to the princes, but were not yet sounded to the people. Delivering this prophecy in public is anathema to the princes, who see

in it cause for killing "this man," as they refer to Yirmiyahu in contempt, for weakening the spirit of the fighters and lowering the people's morale in a time of crisis. They argue before the king as follows (4):

Therefore the princes said to the king: We pray you let **this man** be put to death; for thus he weakens the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, in speaking such words to them.

They conclude by countering the possible argument, which arises several times in the words of Yirmiyahu and with which perhaps Tzidkiyahu agrees, that Yirmiyahu is acting as he does for the welfare of the people: "For **this man** seeks not the welfare of this people, but their hurt."

King Tzidkiyahu, who was apparently counted among those who believed Yirmiyahu's prophecy, has no choice but to agree. He does not explicitly confirm the verdict, but he allows the princes to do as they see fit and emphasizes his inability to protect Yirmiyahu (5): "Then Tzidkiyahu the king said: Behold, he is in your hand, for the king can do nothing against you."

The princes immediately exploit the royal approval and throw Yirmiyahu into a pit in order to kill him (6):

Then they took Yirmiyahu and cast him into the pit of Malkiyahu the king's son, which was in the court of the guard; and they let Yirmiyahu down with ropes. And in the pit there was no water, but only mire; and Yirmiyahu sank in the mire.

It is likely that they adopted this tactic of killing Yirmiyahu in a passive and indirect manner so that they would not be held liable for his execution.¹ It may be that in the present state of the city, when its destruction appears all but certain, they begin to question their approach; perhaps the doubt sneaks into their hearts that Yirmiyahu is speaking the truth, and they therefore fear killing him directly.² From the words of Eved-Melekh in the continuation, it seems that their goal was that he should die of hunger in the pit, but in fact he almost drowned.

The Difference Between Chapter 37 And Chapter 38

¹ The text first says that he was thrown into the pit, but later it says that he was let down into the pit by ropes. It is possible that this is a general description followed by details. How did they throw him into the pit? By way of letting him down by ropes. This action might also have come to lessen the murderous aspect of their actions and turn it into a more indirect execution.

² Compare with the words of Yirmiyahu above (26:15) when the priests and prophets want to kill him because of his prophecy about the Temple of God: "But know for certain that if you put me to death, you shall surely bring innocent blood upon yourselves, and upon this city, and upon its inhabitants; for of a truth the Lord has sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears."

The sequence of events in chapter 38 parallels the sequence of events in chapter 37. In both chapters, Yirmiyahu is accused by government officials of treason. This accusation leads to his punishment and his being thrown into prison or the pit. In the next stage, Yirmiyahu is saved by order of the king. And finally, in both chapters, a secret, private meeting takes place between the king and Yirmiyahu. As we saw in the previous *shiur* and in other *shiurim*, the phenomenon of parallel/double stories stands out in the book of *Yirmiyahu* and is repeated several times. We will focus on the differences and the development in our chapter in light of the previous chapter. As we shall see, throughout our chapter we can identify development and a worsening of the situation.

In chapter 37, Yirmiyahu is accused of a personal act of treason – deserting to the Kasdim. In contrast, here Yirmiyahu is accused of a more serious offense – weakening the hearts of the entire people. Whereas there the accusation was false, as Yirmiyahu argued against Yiri'ya, here the accusation is true and precise, and Scripture itself quotes the words of Yirmiyahu with which he encourages the people to surrender to the Kasdim. This is the reason that Yirmiyahu responds to the first accusation with denial – It is not true! I am not deserting to the Kasdim – whereas here he responds with silence, as the accusations levelled against him are true.

A worsening is also evident with respect to the identity of Yirmiyahu's accusers. In the previous chapter, it was Yiri'ya, who was apparently only a minor official. Here, Yirmiyahu is accused by the princes of Yehuda, who receive also the explicit confirmation of the king,³ who, owing to the severity of the matter, cannot oppose his princes: "For the king can do nothing against you." And finally, in the previous chapter, Yirmiyahu is punished with imprisonment, whereas now he is sentenced to death: "Let this man be put to death."

These differences express the fact that in this chapter we come to the final stretch – the critical moments before the destruction. The respective positions become more extreme, and the consequences become harsher and more severe. This difficult situation is also reflected in the words of the princes to the king (4): "He weakens the hands of the men of war **that remain** in this city," which imply that many have already been killed over the course of the siege and the battles.

Yirmiyahu's Rescue

(7) Now when Eved-Melekh the Kushi, a eunuch who was in the king's house, heard that they had put Yirmiyahu in the pit (the king was sitting in the gate of Binyamin) (8) then Eved-Melekh went out of the king's house, and spoke to the king, saying: (9) My lord the king, **these men** have done evil in all that they have done to Yirmiyahu the prophet,

³ Yukhal the son of Shelemyahu who is mentioned in the list of princes is apparently Yehokhal the son of Shelemyahu, who in the previous chapter was sent by Tzidkiyahu to Yirmiyahu (37:3). Pashchur the son of Malkiya was sent to Yirmiyahu in the parallel chapter, chapter 21.

whom they have cast into the pit; and he may well die there of hunger, seeing that there is no more bread in the city. (10) Then the king commanded Eved-Melekh the Kushi, saying: Take from here thirty men with you, and take up Yirmiyahu the prophet, whom they have cast into the pit, before he dies.

The chapter opened with the hearing of Yirmiyahu's words, which led to his being cast into the pit: "Then Shefatya the son of Mattan **heard**..." (1). Corresponding to this hearing, it now says: "Now when Eved-Melekh the Kushi **heard**..." (7), and this hearing will lead to Yirmiyahu's being rescued from the pit. Surprisingly, Yirmiyahu's rescuer is Eved-Melekh the Kushi, one of the king's non-Jewish attendants, who hears that Yirmiyahu had been thrown into a pit. This might indicate that Yirmiyahu was left with no more open supporters among the Jews of the city; it is precisely a foreign attendant who correctly assesses the situation and sees the injustice perpetrated against Yirmiyahu.

Like the princes, Eved-Melekh, in the wake of what he heard, turns to Tzidkiyahu the king, who had just approved Yirmiyahu's execution, and asks him to save him. He also uses wording that is similar to that of the princes. They had said about Yirmiyahu: "Let **this man** be put to death... for **this man** seeks not the welfare of the people, but their **hurt** (*le-ra'a*)" (4). And Eved-Melekh says about them: "**These men** have done **evil** (*heirei'u*) in all that they have done" (9).⁴

Scripture describes in detail the rescue of Yirmiyahu that was orchestrated by the resourceful Eved-Melekh (11):

So Eved-Melekh took the men with him, and went into the house of the king under the treasury, and took from there old rags and worn out clothes, and let them down by ropes into the pit to Yirmiyahu.

Just as the princes had cast Yirmiyahu into the pit by way of ropes, Eved-Melekh pulls him out by way of ropes. Eved-Melekh's sensitivity is manifest in the fact that he makes a special attempt to bring "old rags and worn out clothes" – that is, old patches of clothing – in order to protect Yirmiyahu's skin while he is being pulled out: "And Eved-Melekh the Kushi said to Yirmiyahu: Put now these old rags and clothes into your armpits under the ropes" (12). Thanks to Eved-Melekh's initiative and resourcefulness, Yirmiyahu emerges from the pit unscathed. As we shall see in the next chapter (39:15-18), because of his actions, Eved-Melekh merits a special prophecy of rescue at the time of the destruction, measure for measure.

⁴ It is difficult to understand what caused Tzidkiyahu to change his mind. It is possible that this is part of the description of his fickle and indecisive nature, as we shall see below. It is also difficult to understand what Eved-Melekh says about hunger, which refers to the end of chapter 37: "Seeing that there is no more bread in the city." The *Da'at Mikra* commentary suggests that since Yirmiyahu was weak because there was no bread, he would die quickly in the pit. But this explanation appears forced.

The Difference Between Yirmiyahu and Yosef

The attempt to kill Yirmiyahu in the pit at the hands of the princes is similar to the attempt to kill Yosef in the pit at the hands of his brothers (*Bereishit* 37:12-30). A comparison of the two stories reveals several substantive and linguistic similarities between them:

1. In both stories, there is a "responsible" element who does not stand up to public pressure. Reuven the firstborn, who tries to save Yosef from his brothers, does not stand up to the pressure and tries afterwards to save him secretly. Similarly, King Tzidkiyahu, who believes in Yirmiyahu's good intentions, does not stand up to the pressure of his princes and is forced to agree that Yirmiyahu should be cast into the pit. In the end, the hate of the majority outweighs the judgment presented by the "responsible" individual.

2. The clearest similarity is that both Yirmiyahu and Yosef are thrown into a pit so that they should die: "Then they took Yirmiyahu and cast him into the pit"; "And they took him and cast him into the pit." In both cases, the pit is described in the same way: "And the pit was empty; there was no water in it" – "And in the pit there was no water, but only mire." Throwing the victim into a pit apparently reflects the attempt to kill him indirectly, so that they should not be considered real killers. As Reuven says: "Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him." (It would seem that in light of the pit without water in the story of the brothers, Yirmiyahu's being cast into a mire-filled pit was worse.)

3. Yosef was removed from the pit by a third party who was not a Jew: "Then there passed by Midyanim, merchants; and they drew and lifted up Yosef out of the pit." Similarly, Yirmiyahu was rescued and pulled out of the pit by virtue of the initiative taken by Eved-Melekh the Kushi: "So they drew up Yirmiyahu with the ropes, and took him up out of the pit."

What is the meaning of the parallel between the two stories?

The story of Yosef and his brothers is a tragic story that is based on an essential misunderstanding between the brothers. Yosef is sent by his father to his brothers to see whether all is well with them:

(13) And Yisrael said to Yosef: Do not your brothers feed the flock in Shekhem? Come and I will send you to them. And he said to him: Here I am. (14) And he said to him: Go, I pray you, **see whether it be well with your brothers** and well with the flocks; and bring me word again.

Yosef's desire to achieve greater intimacy with his brothers emerges also from his words to the man in Shekhem:

(15) And a certain man found him, and, behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, saying: What do you seek? (16) And he said: **I seek my brothers**; tell me, I pray you, where they feed their flocks.

But his brothers misunderstand his intentions and are convinced that he comes to seek their hurt and tell them about his dreams:

(18) And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near to them, they conspired against him to slay him. (19) And they said one to another: Behold, this dreamer comes. (20) Come now, therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say: An evil beast has devoured him; and we shall see what will become of his dreams.

Already earlier it says: "They hated him **and could not speak peacefully to him**" (4), and therefore they could not hear his call for peace and reconciliation. This is the root of the tragedy here.

Similarly, Yirmiyahu seeks the welfare of his people, but the people and the princes are wrong about him and convinced that he has betrayed them and that he seeks their hurt: "For this man seeks not the welfare of this people, but their hurt." Therefore, they wish to kill him. Here too the root of the tragedy lies in the failure to understand the purity of Yirmiyahu's intentions, which leads, on the one hand, to the attempt on his life, and on the other hand, to the people's not listening to him and his warnings.

This parallel joins a broader parallel between Yosef and Yirmiyahu, which we already noted in the past. Yosef is the first exile, who foresees his family's exile and prepares the ground for this exile, as he attests about himself: "For God did send me before you to preserve life" (*Bereishit* 45:5). Similarly, Yirmiyahu was sent to warn the people about the danger of exile, but also to prepare the nation for exile at a later stage. Both Yosef and Yirmiyahu see the future, but their visions arouse the anger of those around them.

Yirmiyahu and Tzidkiyahu

The chapter ends with the final meeting between Tzidkiyahu and Yirmiyahu a short time before the destruction. This is the last chance that Yirmiyahu has to affect the fate of the city. The conversation between them is divided into three stages:

In the first stage (14-16), Tzidkiyahu asks Yirmiyahu to tell him his prophecy and hold nothing back from him. Yirmiyahu, in contrast, fears for his life, in the wake of the danger that he had just faced, and argues that in any case Tzidkiyahu will not listen to him. Tzidkiyahu undertakes not to kill him, but does not explicitly commit himself to listen to Yirmiyahu. In chapter 37 as well, Tzidkiyahu invited Yirmiyahu for a conversation, but there asked only, "Is there any word from the Lord," and Yirmiyahu tersely responded, "There is... you shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Bavel" (37:17-18). The essence of the meeting revolved around improving the conditions of Yirmiyahu's detention. Here, however, there is much greater detail both on the part of the king, who demands to be told everything – "Hide nothing from me"

– and on the part of Yirmiyahu, who spells out his prophecy over seven verses. It is likely that here too the approaching moment of truth brings about a certain change in Tzidkiyahu's attitude.

In the second stage (17-19), Yirmiyahu tells Tzidkiyahu that it is still possible to save the city from destruction: "If you will indeed go out to the princes of the king of Bavel." Just as he had earlier called upon the entire people, he now calls upon Tzidkiyahu to go out and surrender. Yirmiyahu believed all his life that it is always possible to repair the situation, even at the last moment. While "the window of opportunity" was now shrinking and it was no longer possible to prevent the exile, it was possible to reduce its intensity and prevent the destruction of the city and the Temple. In response, Tzidkiyahu expresses concern for his life if he leaves. Earlier, Tzidkiyahu promised Yirmiyahu: "As the Lord lives... neither will I give you into the hand of these men." Now Tzidkiyahu expresses his fear: "Lest they deliver me into their hand and they torture me."

In response (20-23), Yirmiyahu implores Tzidkiyahu to listen to him and not to worry, while on the other hand he graphically and shockingly depicts his fate and the fate of his family, in an attempt to tip the balance and convince Tzidkiyahu to change his position.

The conversation concludes with an order given to Yirmiyahu to keep it a secret, especially from the princes, with an explicit threat against Yirmiyahu's life: "Let no man know of these words, and you shall not die." The king provides a cover story that parallels Yirmiyahu's request in the previous chapter: "But if the princes hear that I have talked with you, and they come to you, and say to you, Tell us now what you have said to the king, hide it not from us, and we will not put you to death; and also what the king said to you; then you shall say to them: I presented my supplication before the king, that he would not cause me to return to Yonatan's house, to die there" (24-26).

Chapters 37-38, and especially this conversation, reveal the character of King Tzidkiyahu, both its bright spots and its shadows. This is especially so regarding his complex attitude toward Yirmiyahu and his prophecies. In chapter 37, he commands that Yirmiyahu be released from prison, against his princes. But in chapter 38 he yields, though unwillingly and with no other choice, to the princes who wish to kill Yirmiyahu. Immediately thereafter he listens to Eved-Melekh the Kushi and orders that Yirmiyahu be raised from the pit.

His last and longest conversation with Yirmiyahu reveals his weakness, his deep fear of his princes, and his worries about the dangers that lay in wait for him outside the walls: "I am afraid of the men of Yehuda who have deserted to the Kasdim, lest they deliver me into their hand, and they torture me."⁵

⁵ He seems to be referring to men of Yehuda who had opposed his policies and were perhaps persecuted for their position by Tzidkiyahu and his princes, just as Yirmiyahu was persecuted. Tzidkiyahu feared their revenge should he also go out to the Kasdim.

Tzidkiyahu stands between two forces: the political pressure of his ministers, on the one hand, and the truth of Yirmiyahu's prophecies, of which he is well aware, on the other. His hesitation and fear of his princes overcome his recognition of the truth in the words of Yirmiyahu. Despite his deep sense of the impending calamity, and despite his belief in the words of Yirmiyahu (which is evident from his repeated appeals to him), Tzidkiyahu prefers to adhere to the known position of refusing to surrender and passively preserve the status quo, rather than to change his perception and policy in the wake of reality and the prophecy and to adopt the clear-eyed policy of Yirmiyahu, against the advice of his princes.

Tzidkiyahu's portrayal in these chapters is not that of an evil or dense king, but rather that of a weak and spineless one. Tzidkiyahu's inability to stand up to the pressures of his princes, despite his personal acquaintance with Yirmiyahu, wipe out the last chance to save Jerusalem and lead to its destruction.

(Translated by David Strauss)