

THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU
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This week's shiurim are dedicated in loving memory
of Yehuda Nattan Yudkowsky z"l

**Shiur #02: The Prophecy of Consecration [Part II] –
The Visions (1:11-19)**

I. Introduction: The Prophet and the Prophecy

Yirmiyahu's consecration as a prophet is immediately followed by his first prophecy, which foretells the impending destruction of Jerusalem. This prophecy is divided into two visions – an almond rod (11-12) and a boiling pot (13-14) – followed by a prophetic vision describing the conquest of Jerusalem (15-19).

The two visions open with a new heading: "And the word of the Lord came to me, saying" (11). This heading signifies that the two visions are not a direct continuation of the prophecy of consecration, which had opened with the very same words. Nevertheless, as we shall see below, these visions include several elements that clearly connect them to that prophecy. It may be suggested then that this is in fact one prophecy, the first part of which focuses on Yirmiyahu himself and his becoming a prophet, while the second part focuses on the essential components of his prophecy.

There is another substantive difference between the two parts of the prophecy as well. The first part mentions prophecy relating to the nations and the kingdoms in general terms, while the second part shifts to a prophecy of the calamity that will befall Israel.

II. The Prophecy of Visions

"A prophecy of visions" is not unique to Yirmiyahu. Such a prophecy appears for the first time in *Amos* (chapters 7-8), with a style and structure similar to that found in our chapter. That prophecy opens with a question asked by God: "What do you see, Amos?" (*Amos* 7:8). This is followed by Amos's answer, which leads to God's explanation of the vision. A similar structure is found in a series of prophecies delivered by Zekharya (chapters 4-5), who lived and prophesied after Yirmiyahu. In all of these prophecies, the visions revealed to the prophet are prophetic symbols of events to come. Another source for comparison is found in the book of *Yirmiyahu* itself in the vision of the baskets of figs (chapter 24).

It is reasonable to assume that there is a connection between the two visions seen by Yirmiyahu in the opening chapter, just as there is a connection between the visions in the series of visions seen by Amos and Zekharya. The connection between the two visions is evident from the headings introducing each vision: "And the word of the Lord came to me, saying" and "And the word of the Lord came to me **a second time**, saying." The two visions also share a similar structure. Each vision is divided into four parts:

1. Introduction.
2. A question directed at Yirmiyahu – "What do you see?"
3. Yirmiyahu's answer: "I see..."
4. God's explanation of the vision.

Before we discuss the significance of each vision, it should be noted that the juxtaposition of the visions to the prophecy of consecration is reminiscent of Moshe's prophecy of consecration at the burning bush (the connection of which to Yirmiyahu's prophecy was explained at length in the previous *shiur*). At the burning bush, Moshe receives three prophetic signs – turning his staff into a serpent, the leprosy appearing on his hand, and turning the water into blood. These signs were meant to reinforce Moshe's own faith in his divine mission, but they also serve to foreshadow his later mission – the signs and wonders that he would perform in Egypt.

III. The Rod of an Almond Tree

(11) And the word of the Lord came to me, saying,
"What do you see, Yirmiyahu?"
And I said, "I see a rod of an almond tree (*shaked*)."
(12) Then the Lord said to me, "You have seen well,
for I will hasten (*shoked*) My word to perform it."

In the first vision, Yirmiyahu identifies the rod of an almond tree, and God responds, "You have seen well," and then explains the meaning of the prophecy. The meaning of the almond rod is explicitly explained in the words of God, as a sort of play on the words *shaked*, "almond," and *shoked*, implying "carefully and hastily bringing to realization." In this respect, the vision is intended merely for the purpose of the sound of the name of the object featured in it.

The commentators sought to clarify whether the almond tree conceals additional, hidden meanings as well.¹ R. Yosef Kara explains that the similarity is not only verbal but substantive:

"I see a rod of an almond tree" – of almonds. For this reason they are called *shokedim*, because their fruit precede all other fruit.

¹ It should be noted that almond trees were common in the area where Yirmiyahu lived, Anatot.

This idea is developed in an interesting exposition found in the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Ta'aniyot* 4:5):

R. Abuna Simana said: "I see the rod of an almond tree" – Just as in the case of the almond tree, twenty-one days pass from the time that it issues its blossoms until its fruit ripens, so too, from the day that the city was breached until the day that the Temple was destroyed, twenty-one days passed.

R. Abuna explains how the symbol of an almond tree relates precisely and specifically to the destruction of Jerusalem.

In order to clarify the precise meaning of the vision, let us pay attention to another detail: Yirmiyahu sees not an almond tree, but a "rod" of an almond tree. The Radak addresses this point, and through it he resolves another difficulty in the vision – what is the meaning of God's response, "You have seen well," which is found only in the vision of the rod of an almond tree?

...For he saw a rod without leaves and without flowers, and he contemplated with his prophetic vision and recognized that it came from an almond tree. Therefore, [God] said to him: "You have seen well." For had he seen it with its leaves and flowers, what good seeing is there? It would have been easy to recognize it [as the rod of an almond tree].

Perhaps God simply wished to encourage Yirmiyahu as he began his prophetic mission. However, it is possible that this detail has a deeper meaning. Yirmiyahu's rod of an almond tree brings to mind another rod of an almond tree – Aharon's almond tree staff, which is mentioned in the story of the contest of staffs that took place in the aftermath of the controversy involving Korach (*Bamidbar* 17:16-24). A precise reading of that passage reveals additional similarities between the two stories. In order to understand these similarities, let us examine the description of the blossoming of Aharon's staff:

(16) And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying:

(17) "Speak to the children of Israel, and take of every one of them a rod, one for each father's house, of all their princes according to the house of their fathers – twelve rods; write every man's name upon the rod.

(18) And you shall write Aharon's name upon the rod of Levi: for one rod shall be for the head of the house of their fathers.

(19) And you shall lay them up in the Tent of Meeting before the Testimony, where I will meet with you.

(20) And it shall come to pass, that the man's rod, whom I shall choose, shall blossom; and I will make to cease from Me the murmurings of the children of Israel, whereby they murmur against you."

(21) And Moshe spoke to the children of Israel, and every one of their princes gave him a rod apiece, for each prince one, according to their

fathers' houses – twelve rods; and the rod of Aharon was among their rods.

(22) And Moshe laid up the rods before the Lord in the tent of the Testimony.

(23) And it came to pass that on the morrow, Moshe went into the tent of the Testimony; and behold, the rod of Aharon for the house of Levi had sprouted and brought forth buds and blossomed and yielded almonds.

(24) And Moshe brought out all the rods from before the Lord to all the children of Israel; and they looked, and took every one his rod.

There are a number of connections between the two stories:

1. In both stories, the almond tree staff plays a symbolic, prophetic role. In *Yirmiyahu*, it signifies God's speedy realization of His Word; in *Bamidbar*, it serves as evidence for the selection of Aharon.
2. The connection becomes stronger though the common trait of the almond tree that is prominent in both contexts – rapid growth and speedy conclusion of a process. It may be argued that what is stated concisely and by way of a play on words in *Yirmiyahu* is described in a living and picturesque manner through the speedy blossoming of Aharon's staff in *Bamidbar*.
3. In both places, the symbol relates to a priest – Aharon the priest and Yirmiyahu of the priests of Anatot – and it appears in the context of selection and consecration to a lofty, spiritual role.

Despite the similarities, it is important to note a subtle difference between the two passages. The story in the book of *Bamidbar* describes a *mateh*, "staff," whereas the prophecy of Yirmiyahu describes a *makeh*, "rod." It seems that this semantic change is not accidental. The staff in the story of Aharon's selection serves as a guide word in the passage and bears a double meaning. The *mateh* is a physical object, but it is also a symbol of leadership; Aharon and his staff are granted the leadership role from among all the staffs, representing the tribes of Israel. In contrast, the rod that appears at the beginning of the book of *Yirmiyahu* replaces the association with leadership that is inherent in the almond tree rod with a different meaning. A *makeh*, in contrast to a *mateh*, serves, among other things, also as an instrument of punishment.² Thus, the rod may be seen as a symbol of the trouble that will befall the people. It is possible that because of these different roles of the rod and the staff, the processes that they undergo are different. Aharon's staff blossoms in order to underscore that it is the only staff that proved to be alive, whereas the rod appearing in Yirmiyahu's prophecy remains lifeless.³

² Thus, we find regarding Bilaam (*Bamidbar* 22:27): "And Bilaam's anger burned, and he struck the ass with a rod." Explicit reference to a rod as an instrument for smiting is found also in David's words to Golyat (I *Shemuel* 17:43): "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?"

³ We also find a similar rod that serves a different purpose – the rod of *luz*, which is identified with the almond, in the story of the flocks of Yaakov and Lavan. There too, the rod generates a certain magic. A rod serving a symbolic prophetic role is also found in the prophecy of

IV. The Boiling Pot

In the second vision, Yirmiyahu sees a boiling pot – a steaming pot sitting on a fire.⁴ As noted earlier, the second vision is a continuation of the first, and a comparison between the two visions is therefore necessary:

	The rod of an almond tree	The boiling pot
(A) Introduction	(11) And the word of the Lord came to me, saying:	(13) And the word of the Lord came to me a second time , saying:
(B) God's question	"What do you see, Yirmiyahu? "	"What do you see?"
(C) Yirmiyahu's answer	And I said, "I see a rod of an almond tree (<i>shaked</i>)."	And I said, "I see a boiling pot, and its face is from the north. "
(D) God's reaction	(12) Then the Lord said to me, "You have seen well, for I will hasten (<i>shoked</i>) My word to perform it."	(14) Then the Lord said to me, "Out of the north the evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land."

Let us examine the similarities and the differences between the two visions:

1. In the first part (A), the words "a second time" are added in the second vision, indicating a relationship between the vision of the pot and the previous vision.

2. In the second part (B), Yirmiyahu's name is not mentioned in the second vision. This change similarly teaches that we are dealing here with a continuation of the previous vision, in which God mentioned the prophet's name.

3. In Yirmiyahu's answer (C) in the second vision, he adds a detail: "And its face is from the north." As we shall see, this detail is critical.

Zekharya (chap. 11), who names one rod Grace (*No'am*) and the other Severity (*Chovelim*) as symbols of the fate of the people of Israel.

⁴ There are a number of views as to the precise interpretation of the vision. Targum Yonatan renders it: "A king who boils like a pot." In his wake, the Radak writes: "*Nafu'ach* – an adjective, which means "boils," and the pot when it boils emits steam." The Septuagint understands *nafu'ach* as referring to the fire under the pot, which is blown in order to raise the flames. Some explain that the reference is to an oven in the form of a pot (A. Melamet, *Yirmiyahu*, pp. 42-43).

4. The connection between the visions emerges also from the symbol included in God's answer regarding the vision of the pot (D): Rapid cooking, which symbolizes the trouble that will quickly come upon Jerusalem.⁵

Despite the similarities, there is a striking difference between the two visions. In the vision of the pot, the calamity is explicitly stated in the words of God, and even the direction from which it will come is explicitly noted. In the vision of the almond tree rod, on the other hand, the impending calamity is not explicitly mentioned. Indeed, references to God's "haste" in fulfilling His Word appears later in Yirmiyahu's prophecies and allows for interpretation in two directions. In one context, the implication is negative:

Therefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them, and a wolf from the deserts shall spoil them, a leopard shall **watch over** (*shoked*) their cities; everyone that goes out from there shall be torn in pieces, because their transgressions are many and their backslidings are increased. (*Yirmiyahu* 5:6)

In another context, the implication is positive:

Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Yehuda with the seed of man and with the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass that as I have **watched over** (*shakadeti*) them to pluck up, and to pull down, and to break down, and to destroy, and to afflict; so will I **watch over** (*eshkod*) them to build, and to plant, says the Lord. (*Yirmiyahu* 31:26-27)

It is possible then that the two visions stand in a chiastic form corresponding to Yirmiyahu's two roles that were described earlier with two short words – to throw down and to build. In light of this, perhaps we can explain the phrase "You have seen well," which is mentioned only in the first vision. God commends Yirmiyahu for the fact that he sees the good side of the vision – not only the rod, but also the blossoming that is concealed within it.

⁵ The vision of the pot might be using a play on words: *nafu'ach* (boiling) – *tipatach* (break forth), similar to the play on words in the vision of the rod of the almond tree (see A. Melamet, *Yirmiyahu*, p. 45).

Yechezkel, Yirmiyahu's younger contemporary, prophesies a similar prophecy of doom (24:1-11), which likens Jerusalem to a pot on the very day that the king of Babylonia will lay siege to Jerusalem, an event that will be explicitly mentioned later in our prophecy. The connection between the two prophecies suggests a different interpretation of the vision of the pot – it may not symbolize the source of the calamity, but rather its cause. Jerusalem is the boiling pot and its face is the entrance of the gates of the city, through which the calamity will enter. Interestingly, northern Jerusalem symbolizes the source of sin in the prophecy of Yechezkel – "Then he brought me to the door of the gate of the Lord's house that was towards the north, and, behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz" (8:14) – and that is where the destruction will begin (9:2). It is notable that for the prophets, north is not only a geographical direction, but also a symbol of divine punishments and catastrophes. See Y. Hoffman's commentary to *Yirmiyahu* (*Mikra Le-Yisrael* series), pp. 236-242.

This is another point that persists throughout Yirmiyahu's prophecies. It falls upon him to identify in his prophecies of doom not only the catastrophe, but also the good that is concealed within them as the foundation for rebuilding.

V. The Conquest of Jerusalem

The chapter continues:

(15) For, behold, I will call all the families of the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord; and they shall come, and they shall set everyone his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, and against all its walls round about, and against all the cities of Yehuda.

(16) **And I will speak** My judgments against them regarding all their wickedness, in that they have forsaken Me, and have burned incense to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands.

The short explanation of the calamity symbolized by the boiling pot is expanded in this section. The previous verse had stated that the evil **shall break forth** (*tipatach*) out of the north, and these verses describe the conquest of Jerusalem by means of the unique image of kings setting their thrones at the entrance (*petach*) of the gates of Jerusalem. This image is apparently taken from ancient reality, as emerges from the Assyrian reliefs that show the Assyrian king sitting on his royal throne opposite a besieged city. This image has another dimension – sitting at the entrance of the gates of a city is also reminiscent of sitting in judgment,⁶ and so it is explicitly stated in the next verse: "**And I will speak My judgments against them.**"

It should be noted that at the beginning of Yirmiyahu's prophecy, he does not explicitly name the northern kingdom that will destroy Jerusalem; only later in his prophecies does he identify it as Babylonia.

Yirmiyahu's prophecy of the destruction of the city should be compared with the actual account of the destruction as it is presented at the end of the book (*Yirmiyahu* 39:5):

But the army of the Kasdim pursued after them and overtook Tzidkiyahu in the plains of Jericho; and when they had taken him, they brought him up to Nevukhadnetzar king of Babylonia, to Rivla in the land of Chamat, where **he spoke judgment against him.**⁷

The reference to judgment is similar, although in chapter 39 the reference is to the Babylonian king judging Tzidkiyahu king of Yehuda (and not the

⁶ This is mentioned in several places in Scripture, including in the book of *Yirmiyahu* itself in the account of Yirmiyahu's judgment in Jerusalem (*Yirmiyahu* 26:10): "When the princes of Yehuda heard these things, then they came up from the king's house unto the house of the Lord and sat down in the entry of the new gate of the Lord's house."

⁷ It should be noted that this combination of *le-daber* and *mishpat* is unique to Yirmiyahu; it appears only another two times in the book (4:12; 12:1) and in the parallel description of the destruction in II *Melakhim* 25:6.

judgment of God). It is possible, however, that the linguistic relationship between the prophecy and its realization teaches that the Babylonians' judgment of Tzidkiyahu reflects divine judgment. On the superficial level, Tzidkiyahu hears the rebuke of Nevukhadnetzar king of Babylonia for his having betrayed and rebelled against him, but Yirmiyahu teaches us that we should hear the rebuke of the Babylonian king as the reproach of God, who had sent Nevukhadnetzar, for Israel's betrayal and rebellion against the King of the Universe: "Regarding all their wickedness, in that they have forsaken Me, and have burned incense to other gods." The king of Babylonia serves here as the unwitting agent of God.

VI. "A Fortified City and an Iron Pillar" – Between Yirmiyahu and the People

The prophecy closes with God encouraging Yirmiyahu to begin his work as a prophet, and it emphasizes the tension that will arise between Yirmiyahu and the people as a result of his prophetic mission:

(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 as a fortified city, and an iron pillar, and walls of brass against the whole land, against the kings of Yehuda, against its 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.

This closing of the prophecy continues the prophecy of visions adjacent to it, but it appears to summarize the prophecy of consecration as a whole.

The section is divided into two parts: "You... I..." This is the structure of a mutual covenant, similar, for example, to the structure of the covenant with Noach and the covenant of circumcision.⁸ It falls upon Yirmiyahu to stand firm and fearlessly proclaim the words of God; at the same time, God will strengthen him and protect him from those who wish to harm him.

This is an expansion and development of what was stated in the prophecy of consecration, as can be seen from the following table:

THE PROPHECY OF CONSECRATION (7-8)	OF THE CLOSING OF THE PROPHECY (17-19)
For you shall go to all to whom I shall send you	You therefore gird up your loins,

⁸ *Bereshit* 9:7-9: "And as for you, be fruitful and multiply... And, behold, I will establish My covenant with you." In both places, the Divine covenant allows man to act without fear. God commands Noach and his sons to be fruitful and multiply, and corresponding to this He commits himself not to bring another flood that will destroy the life that they will create. Similarly, Yirmiyahu is commanded to speak his words of prophecy to the people without fear, while God obligates Himself to protect him from the people.

And whatever I command you, you shall speak.	And arise, and speak to them all that I command you:
Do not be afraid of them:	Do not be dismayed at them, lest I dismay you before them. 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 its princes, against its priests, and against the people of the land. And they shall fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you;
For I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.	For I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you.

The main difference between these two passages lies in the detailing of the commandment: "Do not be afraid of them." At the end of the chapter, there appears also a punishment – "Lest I dismay you before them" – but at the same time it also offers protection: Corresponding to "You therefore gird up your loins," God commits Himself: "For, behold, I have made you this day a fortified city...." The threat and the encouragement highlighted in these verses were meant to prepare Yirmiyahu for the difficult trials that he would be forced to undergo over the course of his prophetic mission – real mortal danger and acute suicidal thoughts.

It is possible that there is also added here the contents of what he was to say to the people. In this way, we can connect the formulation "And speak to them" to what was stated in the previous section: "And I will speak My judgements against them." It appears that the role of the prophet is to convey the words of God to the people and to explain to them the reasons and the meaning of the destruction – a punishment for the people's abandonment of God.⁹

Apart from the command and the promise themselves, it is important to relate to the unique image adopted in this prophecy. The relationship between the prophet and the people is described in warlike terms. He is likened to a fortified city, a pillar of iron and walls of brass, while they are described as an enemy who wishes to breach the walls, but fails to do so. The encouragement directed to Yirmiyahu, "You therefore gird up your loins," is also a military image. What is the meaning of these extreme images?

⁹ There is an additional parallel, though less clear, between verses 18 and 10. In verse 18, it says: "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 its princes, against its priests, and against the people of the land." And in verse 10, we read: "See, **I have this day set you over** the nations and **over** the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant." This parallel sharpens the transition from the general prophecy about the nations in the first part to the prophecy of destruction regarding Israel in the second part.

To understand their meaning, we must remember the content of the prophecy of destruction – the kingdoms will come to Jerusalem and the cities of Yehuda and lay siege to its gates and walls. The similarity between the two descriptions is striking:

Out of the north the evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land . For, behold, I will call all the families of the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord; and they shall come, and they shall set everyone his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, and against all its walls round about, and against all the cities of Yehuda .	For, behold, I have made you this day as a fortified city , and an iron pillar, and walls of brass against the whole land , against the kings of Yehuda , against its princes, against its priests, and against the people of the land.
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According to this correspondence, the people of Yehuda are fighting a twofold battle. They are fighting their enemies from the outside, but at the same time they are also fighting Yirmiyahu, who prophesies evil against them from the inside. In the prophecy of consecration, God tells Yirmiyahu that they will fail in both battles. On the one hand, their walls will not withstand the siege, while on the other hand, they will not breach the brass walls of Yirmiyahu. The reason for both is the same: It is God who will initiate the siege – "For, behold, I will call all the families of the kingdom of the north..." – and it is also He who sends Yirmiyahu: "For, behold, I have made you...."

This can be formulated differently as well. It is precisely the great effort that the people of Yehuda and of Jerusalem will invest in their internal war – against Yirmiyahu – that will bring them to defeat also on the field of their external struggle against Babylonia.

(Translated by David Strauss)