

THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU
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**Shiur #10: The Prophecy Concerning the Potter's House and the
Prophecy Concerning the Bottle (Chapters 18-19)**

I. Introduction: Symbolic Prophecies and Their Meanings

In this *shiur*, we will discuss two prophecies that are recorded one after the other in the book of *Yirmiyahu* – the prophecy concerning the potter's house and the prophecy concerning the earthen bottle. As we shall see, the two prophecies share many common elements, and they both belong to the genre of prophecies that may be termed "symbolic prophecies." In such prophecies, the prophet is commanded to perform a certain action that has a symbolic meaning, thereby demonstrating, usually to his audience, the prophetic message that he was commanded to deliver to them. Such prophecies were delivered by many prophets, the most famous of them being found in the book of *Yechezkel*. A prophecy of this type in the book of *Yirmiyahu* appears already in chapter 13, verses 1-13 (the prophecy concerning the linen belt).¹

These prophecies raise a question regarding the purpose of the actions that the prophet is commanded to perform: Is their entire purpose just to illustrate the prophecy, or do they also contribute to the understanding of the nature and content of the prophecy?²

To answer this question, we must carefully consider the parable and examine the relationship between it and the moral.

¹ Another motif shared by the two prophecies is the motif of *hashchata*, spoiling. In the prophecy concerning the linen belt, it says: "And behold the belt was spoiled (*nishchat*)... After this manner will I spoil (*ashchit*) the pride of Yehuda." In the prophecy concerning the potter's house, it says: "And the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled (*ve-nishchat*)."

² These general questions regarding the symbolic prophecies have been discussed at length by both the earlier and the later commentaries, in particular with respect to the prophecies of *Yechezkel*, which are strikingly strange. A detailed discussion of these issues is beyond the parameters of this study.

II. The Prophecy Concerning the Potter's House: The Parable and its Meaning

The first prophecy, the prophecy concerning the potter's house, consists of a parable (1-4) and its moral (5-12), which deals with the possibility of changing a Divine decree and the relationship between such a change and human actions. We will begin by examining the parable:

- (1) The word which came to Yirmiyahu from the Lord,
- (2) saying: Arise, and go down to **the potter's** house, and there I will cause you to hear My words.
- (3) Then I went down to **the potter's** house, and, behold, he was at work on the wheels.
- (4) And the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of **the potter**: so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to **the potter** to make it.

The prophecy opens with a command to Yirmiyahu to go to the potter's house, making it clear that only there will he be able to hear the word of God. The delay in delivering God's word seems to be based on the assumption that only through direct experience of the work of the potter will the prophet be able to reach a proper understanding of the prophecy. As we shall see, the process of pottery-making is the axis around which the prophecy revolves; understanding the prophecy depends on a clarification of the precise meaning of that process.³

The potter's house is the workshop in which the potter transforms the formless lump of clay that is in his hands into a vessel that has value and function. Yirmiyahu sees before him the spinning of the lump of clay, which allows the potter to fashion it into a vessel. In the second stage of the process, an "accident" occurs; the vessel that the potter had shaped out of clay is spoiled, and the potter's plan is stymied. In the third stage, the potter fashions a new vessel from the clay that been ruined, different from the previous one.

After Yirmiyahu sees with his own eyes the process of forming the vessel, how it becomes ruined, and the making of a new vessel, the word of God comes to him in a prophecy:

- (5) Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying:
- (6) O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this **potter?** says the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in **the potter's** hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.
- (7) At one time I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, or to destroy;
- (8) but if that nation, against whom I have pronounced turn from their evil, I repent of the evil that I thought to do to them.

³ The potter is mentioned seven times in this prophecy and another two times in chapter 19.

- (9) And at another time, I speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant,
- (10) but if it do evil in My sight, that it obey not My voice, then I repent of the good, with which I said I would benefit them.

The moral seems to be straightforward: The potter is God, and the clay with which he works is the house of Israel. This metaphor indicates God's absolute control of His people, for better or worse, for building or for destruction. Such an idea is found already in the prophecy of Yeshayahu (29:16): "O your perverseness! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay? For shall the work say of him that made it: He made me not? Or shall the thing framed say of him that framed it: He had no understanding?"⁴

But in our chapter we face a difficult problem when we correlate the parable with the moral. The ruining in the parable is presented as an unintended accident, which thwarts the potter's original plan and forces him to start anew. When we turn to the moral, we encounter an idea that, were it not for this explicit passage, we would not have dared to suggest: God's plan, as it were, is ruined and shattered by harsh reality! One might argue that we should not be precise about the details of the parable, but relate only to the larger picture. Nevertheless, it seems that a deeper idea underlies the passage.

III. The Clay and the Potter

As noted, the image used in the parable is that of a potter, who wishes to make a certain vessel, and even though his plan is disrupted, he goes back and fashions a vessel "as it seemed good to the potter to make it." It appears that his second vessel is not identical with the first vessel that he had intended to make; it does not correspond to his original plan. How, then, can it be said that this is the vessel that "seemed good to the potter to make it"?

The prophecy clarifies that the potter takes raw material and creates with it as he pleases, the sole limitation being the quality of the material with which he is working. The original plan was based on an assumption regarding the quality of the material, but when it became clear that the material was limited and not up to the job, it became evident in retrospect that his initial assumption was unfounded. Thus, it turns out that it is the second plan that seemed good to the potter to make it, as it corresponds to the limitations of the clay.

The solution to the problem presented above seems to lie in this distinction. The house of Israel is like clay in the hand of God, the creator of history, and the fashioning of its destiny is based on its moral quality. But Israel's moral quality does not depend upon God's will because from the

⁴ See also the image later in the book (45:9-10): "Woe to him that strives with his maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him that fashions it: What make you? As for your work, it has no hands? Woe to him that says to his father: What begets you? Or to the woman: With what are you in travail?"

moment that God created the world and constricted Himself, He entrusted the choice between good and bad in the hands of man alone. Thus, the only limitation that can stand in the way of God's plan is the people's choice. If they choose to do that which is good in God's eyes, their historical destiny will be fashioned in a positive manner. But the moment that they corrupt their ways, their destiny will perforce change in accordance with their deficient moral quality.

This does not contradict God's initial plan because that plan was connected from the outset to the state of the material with which it was dealing. It turns out now that the current plan is that which seemed good to the Creator and that it does not contradict His will.

In fact, this is the substance of the words of Yirmiyahu himself in his explanation of the parable: The fulfillment of the Divine plan depends exclusively on "the nation." It can turn from its evil, and thus cancel the evil decree that was issued against it, or it can do evil, and thus cancel the good plan that had awaited it.

It should be noted that the image of the clay in the hand of the potter in *Yirmiyahu* expresses an idea that is precisely the opposite of the idea of God's control that emerges from the book of *Yeshayahu*. It is not God who controls the destiny of people and kingdoms, but rather man, since God's plans depend and are conditioned upon man's actions and decisions.⁵

It is worth noting the wording of the parable with respect to the second vessel:

As it deemed good to the potter to make it.

This is the very same wording that Yirmiyahu uses later in the book (27:5):

I have **made** the earth... and have given it to **whom it seemed good** in My eyes.

These formulations, and the verse appearing in our chapter, are the foundation of the words of R. Yitzchak, cited by Rashi at the beginning of his commentary to the Torah:

All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it **to whom it seemed good in His eyes**. When He willed He

⁵ This unique image served as the foundation of one of the most well-known *piyyutim* included in the Ashkenazic rite for Yom Kippur, which develops the image of the potter and his clay at length and describes various different aspects of it. However, there is an essential difference between the two: The prophecy was meant to shift the responsibility to the people and to teach them that it is in their power to cancel the decree, provided that they mend their ways. The *piyyut*, in contrast, emphasizes the dependence and limitations of the clay, which is found in the hands of the potter for better or worse, and it ends with a plea to the potter on the very day of judgment: "Look at the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination."

gave it to them, and when He willed He took it from them and gave it to us.

It is God's will, that which seemed good in His eyes, to give the land to the people who do that which is good in His eyes.

IV. The Prophecy Concerning the Potter's House and the Story of the Creation and of the Flood

The image of God as a potter (*yotzer*) is not a novelty introduced by the prophecy of Yirmiyahu, nor even by the prophecy of Yeshayahu. In fact, this image appears already at the beginning of the Torah. The term *yetzira* appears twice in the creation story in *Bereishit* 2, with respect to man and the beasts who were created "of the dust of the ground." The process of man's creation is likened to the process of creating a clay vessel: God fashions man out of the dust of the ground and "breathes" (*nofe'ach*) the breath of life into him. Accordingly, the destruction of man in the flood is described with a term taken from the same semantic field: "I will destroy (*emcheh*) man" – man who was created out of the dust is destroyed by the waters of the flood and he returns to dust.

The similarity between the two contexts is not limited to the image of the process of creation, but also to its potential "history." Both in the story of the potter and in the story of the flood, following the process of creation, an account is given of destruction that is followed by renewed creation.

In addition, both descriptions use common expressions. The term *hashchata* appears in the prophecy concerning the potter's house ("And the vessel was spoiled [*ve-nishchat*]") and in the decision concerning the flood ("The earth also was corrupt [*va-tishachet*] before the Lord... I will destroy them [*mashchitam*] with the earth").

The term *nechama* also appears in both places,⁶ twice in connection with the original creation – "And the Lord repented [*va-yinachem*] that He had made man... for I repent [*nichamti*] that I made them" – and twice in our prophecy, once in a negative sense: "I repent (*ve-nichamti*) of the good," but also once in a positive sense: "I repent (*ve-nichamti*) of the evil that I thought to do to them."

What is the meaning of this correspondence? Yirmiyahu's prophetic parable that opens with a description of the making of earthenware vessels in the potter's house gives this image great development and intensity. The fashioning of the pots is not only a metaphor for the making of man's body, but for the shaping of the historical destiny of the nations and kingdoms in the hand of God, in the workshop of the universe. However, despite the creative

⁶ Additional expressions common to the prophecy concerning the potter's house and the decision to bring the flood: "And all the impulse (*yetzer*) of the thoughts (*machshavot*) of his heart was only evil (*ra*) continuously" – "I frame (*yotzer*) evil (*ra'a*) against you, and devise a device (*choshev machshava*) against you." It should be noted that the word *machshava* in Biblical Hebrew means "plan."

power and reality of the prophecy, it seems that the main innovation in Yirmiyahu's prophecy is the new explanation given to the image of pottery-making. In the story of creation, the image of pottery-making served in one direction only – the pottery that was spoiled and that forced the potter to destroy it and to fashion it anew. In the prophecy concerning the potter's house, two possibilities open up – God can repent of the good and destroy the people, but in equal measure He can repent of the evil and cancel the decree.

The prophecy provides the metaphor of the potter with an optimistic explanation that focuses on the flexibility and possibilities for change, placing the responsibility on the individual and the nation.

V. The Prophecy Concerning the Potter's House as a Development of the Prophecy of Consecration

As we learned in the first chapter, Yirmiyahu's prophecy of consecration contains a summary of the main points of Yirmiyahu's prophetic messages. A clear parallel between the prophecies emerges from the following table:

<i>Yirmiyahu 1</i>	<i>Yirmiyahu 18</i>
(10) 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,	(7) At one time I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, or to destroy.
	(8) But if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I repent of the evil that I thought to do to them.
	(9) And at another time, I speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom
to build and to plant.	to build and to plant,
	(10) but if it do evil in My sight, and it obey not My voice, then I repent of the good, with which I said I would benefit them.

The correspondence between the prophecies is instructive, and it underscores the novelty of our prophecy. God reminds Yirmiyahu of the mission that had been cast upon him in his consecration prophecy: "See, I have this day set you over the nations and the kingdoms..." However, in chapter 1, it seemed that the purpose of his prophecy was merely to announce the destruction and the rebuilding, whereas in our prophecy it becomes clear that the matter depends upon the situation of the "nation," or of Israel:

But if that nation repent turn from their evil, I repent of the evil...
 But if it do evil... then I repent of the good.

The idea that runs through our prophecy is that despite the resoluteness of the prophecy itself and the decree of calamity that it contains, there is always the possibility of change, which depends exclusively on the people. God's plans are not absolute and final, but rather pending and contingent on changes in human actions.⁷

This optimistic view is evident once again later in the prophecy. After opening with a general description that relates to all the nations, "At one time I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom," the prophecy shifts to the people of Israel and their present situation:

(11) Now therefore speak to the men of Yehuda, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying: Thus says the Lord: Behold, I **frame** [*yotzer*] evil against you and **devise a device** (*choshev machshava*) against you; return now everyone from his evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

(12) And they said: There is no hope; but we will walk after **our own devices** (*machshevoteinu*), and we will every one do after the stubbornness of his evil heart.

The prophecy establishes that at the present time, a "device" was devised against the people because of their actions. But this plan is not absolute and is still subject to change. This being the case, the prophet calls upon the people to repent from their evil ways.

In practice, despite the call of the prophet and his dramatic prophecy, his words are met by the stubbornness of the people. Countering God's device, the people say: "We will walk after our own devices."

VI. The Prophecy Concerning the Bottle

After the prophecy concerning the potter's house, we find in chapter 19 one of the harshest prophecies of calamity in the book. This prophecy, which can be called "the prophecy concerning the bottle," describes the severity of the punishment and its finality.⁸

Like the prophecy concerning the linen belt in chapter 13 and the prophecy concerning the potter's house in chapter 18, the prophecy opens with a symbolic action – taking an earthenware bottle:

⁷ It is interesting that in the prophecy of consecration, the term *yetzira* is used with respect to Yirmiyahu: "Before I formed you (*etzarcha*) in the belly I knew you."

⁸ Between the two prophecies, there is a passage that deals with a different matter (18-23). These verses describe how Yirmiyahu's opponents, in response to his prophecy, are planning to ambush and silence him. It appears that this passage is brought here because of the connection between Yirmiyahu's prophecy, which seeks to cancel the negative plans of the people – "Behold, I frame evil against you, and devise a device against you; return now every one from his evil way" – and the words of his opponents, who repay good with evil and plot evil schemes against him: "Then they said: Come and let us contrive devices against Yirmiyahu" (18). We will return to this passage in the *shiur* dealing with the personal side of Yirmiyahu.

- (1) Thus says the Lord: Go and get a potter's earthen bottle, and take of the elders of the people and of the elders of the priests;
- (2) and go into the valley of Ben-Hinom, which is by the entry of the gate of Charsit, and proclaim there the words that I shall tell you.

At first Yirmiyahu, prophesies in the presence of the elders of the people and the elders of the priests at the entry of the gate of Charsit.⁹ Afterwards, he repeats his prophecy before the entire people in the courtyard of the Temple.

Pashchur ben Imer, a Temple priest and false prophet, aggressively responds to Yirmiyahu's prophecy, strikes him, and even puts him in the stocks. When he is released, Yirmiyahu responds with a harsh prophecy of calamity directed at Pashchur himself.

Let us understand the complex connection between this prophecy and the prophecy concerning the potter's house in the previous chapter.

The prophecy concerning the bottle is reminiscent of the prophecy concerning the potter's house in several ways. Both prophecies mention a potter. In chapter 18, Yirmiyahu must go to the potter's house and see the production processes of his vessels; in chapter 19, he must purchase the finished product, "a potter's earthen bottle." In addition, in both prophecies the potter's vessel is used as a metaphor for the nation's destiny.

However, it is precisely these similarities between the chapters that underscore the striking difference between them. Whereas the first prophecy illustrates the flexibility regarding the destiny of the nations, like clay in the hand of the potter, the second prophecy illustrates the opposite idea:

- (10) Then you shall break the bottle in the sight of the men that go with you.
- (11) And shall say to them: Thus says the Lord of hosts: Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, which cannot be made whole again; and you they shall bury them in Tofet, till there be no place to bury.

Unlike the vessel of clay in the prophecy concerning the potter's house that was spoiled and then refashioned, the breaking of the bottle symbolizes the hopeless situation – the potter's vessel that cannot be made whole again.¹⁰ Even its name, *bakbuk*, is given a new role and meaning in the prophecy:

⁹ Yonatan renders this "*tara kalkalta*," "dung gate." In similar fashion, Rashi explains that they would cast away broken pottery there. According to this, even the place symbolizes the fate of the people of Jerusalem, who will be cast away like broken pottery that nobody wants.

¹⁰ The term *rippui* is used both in connection with healing disease and in connection with fixing something that is broken. For example: "And he repaired (*va-yerape*) the altar of the Lord that was broken down" (I *Melakhim* 18:30).

(7) **And I will make void** (*u-vakoti*) the counsel of Yehuda and Jerusalem in this place; and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies and by the hands of those that seek their lives: and their carcasses will I give to be food for the birds of the sky and for the beasts of the earth.¹¹

What is the meaning of this dramatic change? How did the plasticity of the clay in the potter's house turn into the rigidity of the bottle? It seems that these two prophecies relate to two different points in time and that in the editing of the book they were placed next to each other because of the substantive similarity between them.¹² The first prophecy was delivered to the people at an early stage, when there was still a place for repair and renewal, apparently in the days of Yoshiyahu; the second prophecy reflects the crisis to which the people arrived when the malleable clay hardened to the point that it turned into a bottle that could no longer be changed and that can no longer be fixed, but only broken. This prophecy may have been delivered in the days of Yehoyakim, when the possibilities of change and windows of repair were shut one after the other.

Some scholars have noted that a similar practice of a symbolic breaking of pottery is known from ancient Egyptian sources. I will bring here the words of Y. Hoffman in his commentary to *Yirmiyahu*, who also notes the essential difference between this practice and Yirmiyahu's use of a clay vessel:

Egyptian texts dating to the 18-19 centuries B.C.E, known as execration texts, testify to the fact that ceremonies were conducted in ancient Egypt in the course of which the enemies of the Pharaoh were cursed. To this end, they would write the name and description of the enemy on a clay vessel or figurine and then break the vessel or figurine... Breaking the clay was considered a magical spell that would bring evil upon the enemy. In the case of Yirmiyahu, the breaking served to illustrate his words, while in the Egyptian ritual the smashing of the pottery was the main thing. Therefore, Yirmiyahu adds words of explanation both to the sin of the people and to the punishment that would befall them... More important and instructive is the essential difference between them. As stated, the Egyptian ritual was a magical ceremony. By smashing the pottery by a person authorized to do so and in a magical manner, the king forced his will upon the higher powers, which could no longer act but in accordance with what was decreed by the magical spell... It was entirely different with Yirmiyahu. Shattering the bottle was only meant to symbolize what would happen to the people if they do not change their ways. Not only is there no hint to the idea of the possibility of forcing any kind of action upon God, there is not even an assumption that God Himself of His own free will

¹¹ The use of names of objects as symbols in Yirmiyahu's prophecy is found already in his prophecy of consecration: "A rod of an almond (*shaked*) tree... For I will hasten (*shoked*) My word to perform it."

¹² We already saw a similar phenomenon in the arrangement of the prophecies in the book of *Yirmiyahu* in chapters 3-4 and in chapter 11.

has to punish the people because He already decreed a punishment. Yirmiyahu made this point clear in the parable concerning the potter's house.

The prophecy opens with a difficult expression:

(3) Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, which whoever hears it, his ears shall tingle.

This sharp expression appears in two other prophecies of calamity in the Bible: In the prophecy concerning Eli, his family, and the *Mishkan* in Shilo in I *Shmuel* (3:11), and in the prophecy concerning the destruction of the kingdom of Yehuda in II *Melakhim* (21:12). This connection is not accidental. It seems that it expresses the inner connection between the destruction of the *Mishkan* in Shilo, which lost its meaning as the house of God and became corrupt because of the erroneous attitude of the priests toward it, and the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, which became a den of thieves that gave unconditional confidence and encouraged moral and religious corruption, as Yirmiyahu warned in his prophecy concerning God's Temple (chap. 7). In that context, Yirmiyahu even drew an explicit comparison between the bitter fate of Shilo and the fate that awaits Jerusalem.¹³

¹³ The two prophecies are also similar with respect to the sins that they mention. In our prophecy, we read (4-5): "Because they have forsaken Me, and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it to other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known, nor the kings of Yehuda, and have filled this place with the blood of innocents; they have built also the high places of the Ba'al, to burn their sons with fire for burnt-offerings to the Ba'al, which I commanded not, nor spoke it, neither came it into My mind." The sins of bloodshed and idolatry, and especially the sin of offering sons to the Molekh, are also mentioned in chapter 7. In addition, it seems that the punishments mentioned in the two prophecies are also similar and are measure for measure for the sins in the Tofet.