

THE BOOK OF YIRMIYAHU
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Shiur 29: The Assassination of Gedalyahu (Part II)

Introduction: The Aftermath of the Assassination

After the assassination of Gedalyahu, the remnant of Yehuda are at a loss regarding their future. As we have seen, apart from the personal consequences of the attack for Gedalyahu, his murder had dramatic national ramifications. The assassination of the official leader of the remnant of Yehuda who had been appointed by the king of Bavel was liable to eliminate the last chance for restoring the Jewish presence in *Eretz Yisrael* (41:16-18):

Then Yochanan the son of Kare'ach, and all the captains of the forces that were with him, took all the remnant of the people from Mitzpa, whom he had recovered from Yishmael, the son of Netanya (after the latter had slain Gedalya the son of Achikam), mighty men of war, and the women, and the children, and the eunuchs whom he then brought from Giv'on; and they departed, and dwelt in Gerut-Kimeham, which is by Bet-Lechem, to go to enter into Egypt, because of the Kasdim. For they were afraid of them, because Yishmael the son of Netanya had slain Gedalyahu the son of Achikam, whom the king of Bavel had made governor over the land.

They go south, their objective being "to go to enter into Egypt" – to seek asylum among Bavel's principal enemy, but they make an intermediate stop at Gerut-Kimeham, which is by Bet-Lechem.¹ Their primary concern now is that the Kasdim will take revenge upon the Jews as punishment for their rebellion, making no distinction between the real culprits in the murder and those who supported Gedalyahu. Everyone will be suspect in their eyes for killing the official who had been appointed by the king of Bavel.

The Appeal to Yirmiyahu: "The way in which we may walk"

In their distress, the remaining people turn to Yirmiyahu, seeking to hear from him the word of God (42:1-3):

Then all the captains of the forces, and Yochanan the son of Kare'ach,

¹ Bet-Lechem is located along the "Way of the Patriarchs," south of Jerusalem. It is one of the stations on the way south towards Egypt. The precise location of Gerut-Kimeham is not known. The Targum identifies it with Kimeham the son of Barzilai the Gil'adi. According to the Targum, Kimeham received the place from David in reward for the kindness performed for him by his father during Avshalom's rebellion.

and Yezanya the son of Hoshaya, and all the people from the least even to the greatest, came near, and said to Yirmiyahu the prophet: Let now our supplication be accepted before you, and pray for us to the Lord your God, for all this remnant, for we are left but a few of many, as your eyes see us; that the Lord your God may show us the way in which we may walk and the thing we may do.

There has been no mention of Yirmiyahu since his meeting with Nevuzar'adan; we do not know how he reacted to the assassination and the events that preceded it. The text, as it were, has made Yirmiyahu disappear.² On the other hand, in contrast to the period that preceded the destruction when the people bluntly and repeatedly rejected the words of Yirmiyahu, here they seek the word of God from his mouth. Scripture also emphasizes that the appeal comes from the entire people – all the captains of the forces and all the people – from the least to the greatest. It seems that the dramatic turnaround in Yirmiyahu's role in the story reflects the profound change in the people's attitude toward Yirmiyahu, which stemmed from the clear proof of his being right – the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the people to Bavel. It seems that now they are finally ready to listen to him and receive the word of God from his mouth.

Yochanan and his men turn to Yirmiyahu with a request that he pray for them and that he guide them as to how they should conduct themselves in the future. There is great similarity between their request and the definition of the prophet's role found in Yitro's words to Moshe. This similarity joins an entire series of parallels between Moshe and Yirmiyahu spread out across the book:

Yirmiyahu 42	Shemot 18
And pray for us to the Lord your God... that the Lord your God may show us the way in which we may walk, and the thing we may do.	Be you the link between the people and God, that you may bring the cases to God. And you shall teach them the ordinances and the laws, and shall show them the way in which they must walk, and the work that they must do.

A prophet, according to Yitro, acts as a mediator between the people and God, bringing the words of the people to God and transmitting the commands of God to the people. Yirmiyahu's role here is not limited to teaching them the word of God; he must also to pray for them. Yirmiyahu's tragedy had lain in the gap between his attempt to beseech God on the people's behalf, serving as their prayer leader, and the people's refusal to listen to him and see him as a prophet who represents them. Now the situation is different; the entire nation relates to him as a true prophet, who

² Yirmiyahu's disappearance may symbolize the fact that he completed his mission, as it were, with Gedalyahu's rise to power. Only after Gedalyahu's assassination does it retroactively become clear that his mission is not over, and Yirmiyahu then once again returns to center stage. A prophet is needed only when there there is no fitting political leader.

prays on their behalf as their representative.

"The way in which we may walk" bears a double meaning. In its literal sense, it refers to which way they should turn – continue south or return north. In its metaphoric sense, it should be understood as it was used by Yitro – should they choose the path of exile, or the path of rebuilding and overcoming despite the difficulties that this will entail?

In the next stage, the two sides express their commitment to God. Yirmiyahu heeds the people's request, agreeing to pray on their behalf and to transmit all of God's words to them (4):³

Then Yirmiyahu the prophet said to them: **I have heard** (*shamati*) you; behold, I will pray to the Lord your God according to your words, and it shall come to pass, **that whatever thing the Lord shall answer you**, I will declare it to you; I will keep nothing back from you.

The people respond with an impressive declaration of loyalty and absolute obedience to the word of God (5-6):

Then they said to Yirmiyahu: The Lord be a true and faithful witness between us, if we do not act **according to all the things for which the Lord your God shall send you to us**. Whether it be good or whether it be evil, we will **obey** (*nishma*) the voice of the Lord our God, to whom we send you; that it may be well with us, when we **obey** (*nishma*) the voice of the Lord our God.

The people make prominent use of the words good and evil: "Whether it be **good**, or whether it be **evil**... that it may be **well** with us." In other words, God knows what is good for us and we therefore will obey Him, even if the matter seems evil to us. Their obedience is unconditional.

YIRMIYAHU'S PROPHECY TO THE REMNANT OF THE NATION

At this point, we wait with suspense, together with the entire nation, to hear God's word in Yirmiyahu's mouth. Instead, there is a surprising delay of ten days (!) in Yirmiyahu's response: "And it came to pass, after ten days, that the word of the Lord came to Yirmiyahu" (7). This delay is reminiscent of Yirmiyahu's silence in the face of the words of Chananya the son of Azur, and his later response to his words (28:6:12). In both cases, the delay reflects the principle that true prophecy depends not upon the prophet, but upon the will of God, and so the prophet cannot determine its time or content. (This is meant to serve as a backdrop for the arguments raised against the words of Yirmiyahu below.)

Yirmiyahu urges Yochanan and his men to remain in *Eretz Yisrael* and

³ Here, too, there is a change from the situation prior to the destruction, for until now Yirmiyahu's prayers were blocked by God (see, e.g., 7:16; 11:14), whereas now he prays and his prayer is heard.

warns them against going down to Egypt. This reverses the prophetic message that Yirmiyahu preached during the years that preceded the destruction – that of submission and acceptance and encouraging life in exile. His words are divided into two parts. The first part deals with the possibility of living in *Eretz Yisrael*, in accordance with the word of God (10-12), while the second part deals with the possibility that the people will refuse and seek to go down to Egypt (13-22).

The fundamental importance of staying in *Eretz Yisrael* in accordance with the Divine plan is spelled out in detail in the first part of Yirmiyahu's words. In verse 10, Yirmiyahu relates to God's plan for the nation: "If you will still abide in this land, then I will build you and not pull you down, and I will plant you and not pluck you up; for I repent of the evil that I have done to you." His words parallel that which was stated in his prophecy of consecration (1:10): "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, to build, and to plant." The focus of Yirmiyahu's prophecy until now has been on the rooting out and pulling down, the destruction and the throwing down. But now the time has come for building and planting. God repented of the evil that He did, as was stated in the prophecy concerning the potter's house (18:7-8):⁴ "At one time I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, or to destroy; 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.**"

In verse 11, Yirmiyahu moves on to the earthly sovereign – the king of Bavel:

Be not **afraid** of the king of Bavel, of whom you are **afraid**; be not **afraid** of him, says the Lord: for I am with you to save you, and to deliver you from his hand.

The primary message here is that the people must not be afraid of the king of Bavel, for this time God will protect them from him. These words echo Gedalyahu's oath to the captains of the forces (40:9): "**Fear not** to serve the Kasdim; **dwell in the land** and serve the king of Bavel, and it shall be well with you." But Gedalyahu made them this promise as the appointee of the king of Bavel; now that he has been assassinated, this oath is no longer valid. The prophet renews it in the name of God; now it falls upon the people to live in the land by Divine command, and not in service of the king of Bavel. The wording regarding God's protection precisely parallels the wording regarding God's protection in Yirmiyahu's prophecy of consecration (1:8): "Do not be

⁴ The main difference is that the prophecy concerning the house of the potter deals with repentance for the evil that God only thought to do, whereas here the repentance is for the evil that He already brought upon them. This difference is related to the reason for the repentance. There it says: "But if that nation against whom I have pronounced turn from their evil." Therefore, God too "repents" from His evil. In contrast, here there is no mention of Israel's repentance. The reason for God's repentance lies not in the people's repentance, but in God's covenant with His people. Despite the punishment and destruction, God repents from His evil and wants to rebuild His nation. This idea of redemption that is not dependant upon repentance is a fundamantal concept in Yirmiyahu's prophecies of consolation.

afraid of them; for I am with you to deliver you." But here the roles are reversed. There Yirmiyahu had concerns about the people to whom he must deliver prophecies of calamity, and God promised to protect him, whereas here the people have concerns about Bavel, and Yirmiyahu promises them Divine protection. The people receive a sort of prophetic mission!

Yirmiyahu concludes this part of his words as follows (12): "And I will show mercies to you, that He may have mercy upon you, and let you return to your own land."⁵ According to the Radak, this verse refers to the exile: "'And let you return to your own land' – he speaks of the exile, and he says 'you' because the majority were exiled, and the minority is included in the majority." From here we see that the actions of the remnant can have far-reaching consequences for the fate of the entire nation!⁶

The second part of Yirmiyahu's words, which is several times longer, moves on to the negative side – the refusal to remain in the land and its consequences (13-14): "But if you say: We will not dwell in this land... but we will go into the land of Egypt." Most of the verses in this part are dedicated to harsh threats that will be realized if the people go down to Egypt. There is a striking lack of proportion between the two parts of the prophecy, the length and rhetorical intensity of the second part being much greater than that of the first part. What is the reason for this? Yirmiyahu senses the mood of the people and their inclination to go down to Egypt, and he hears the voices emanating from them.⁷ He first presents them with the positive option, but when he sees their reactions he begins to warn them not to go down to Egypt. The warning is repeated and intensified from one stage to the next. This is perhaps another expression of Yirmiyahu's desperate rhetorical efforts to persuade the remnant of Yehuda. First he merely describes their bitter fate in Egypt (13-17):

But if you say: We will not dwell in this land, neither obey the voice of the Lord your God, saying: No, but we will go into the land of Egypt, where we shall see no war, nor hear the sound of the shofar, nor have hunger for bread; and there will we dwell. And now therefore hear the word of the Lord, you remnant of Yehuda. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: If indeed you set your faces to enter into Egypt and go to sojourn there; then it shall come to pass that the sword which you feared shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine of which you were afraid shall follow close after you there in Egypt; and there you shall die. And all the men that set their faces to go into Egypt to sojourn there shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the

⁵ This expression corresponds to Yaakov's words to his sons before they went down to Egypt to the Egyptian viceroy (*Bereishit* 43:14): "And God Almighty give you mercy before the man." This is another parallel between the two stories. There the mercy is before the man – Yosef; here it is before the king of Bavel.

⁶ It is also possible to interpret the verse as referring to the remnant, so that it means that the king of Bavel will allow you to return to your lands. See *Da'at Mikra* commentary, ad loc.

⁷ This is what Radak learns from the continuation of Yirmiyahu's words: "'And now I have this day declared it to you, but you have not obeyed' – for he did not yet finish talking, and they did not answer him, but he knew that it was their intention to go to Egypt in any case."

pestilence; and none of them shall remain or escape from the evil that I will bring upon them.

The people seek to leave the country for fear of war and famine. The horrors of the years of war and siege were seared into their minds, and they yearn now for a quiet life without threats, including threats to their personal security and livelihood, and they believe that in Egypt they will achieve this. But Yirmiyahu asserts that their fate will be just the opposite. The sword and the famine will pursue them into Egypt, to their deaths. In other words, the famine and the sword are the consequence not of location, but of their moral-religious choices. Yirmiyahu concludes in verse 17 with the combination "sword, famine, and pestilence," which is mentioned many times in Yirmiyahu's prophecies concerning the destruction (see, for example, 21:9).⁸

In the next stage, the tone of the prophecy intensifies and the conditional threat becomes real (18):

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: As My anger and My fury has been poured out upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so shall My fury be poured out upon you when you shall enter into Egypt. And you shall be an oath, and an astonishment, and a curse, and a reproach; and you shall see this place no more.

Here there is an explicit comparison between the punishment of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the punishment of those going down to Egypt, and to this is added terms of curse and reproach taken from the section in the Torah containing the curses. Yirmiyahu concludes by saying that those who go down to Egypt will never return to *Eretz Yisrael*.

Yirmiyahu's words indicate that going down to Egypt is not only a passive nullification of the attempt to rehabilitate the people in their land. There is another dimension. There is a fundamental contradiction between the building and reconstruction of *Eretz Yisrael* and the descent to Egypt. This becomes clear in light of the symbolic meaning of the descent and return to Egypt in Scripture, which is the complete opposite of redemption and expresses the nullification of the exodus from Egypt.⁹ The parallel that

⁸ It is worth noting another contrast between what they thought and their real fate. They think that they will come to Egypt to live there – "and there will we dwell" (14), that is, we will settle there. But Yirmiyahu tells them that they will come only "to sojourn there" (15), that is, to live there temporarily. This is the opposite of the story of Israel's descent to Egypt in the days of the patriarchs, which started as a descent "to sojourn in the land" temporarily until the famine passes, but turned into an extended permanent dwelling.

⁹ Thus, for example, the Torah concludes the section of curses in *Parashat Ki-Tavo*: "And the Lord shall bring you back into Egypt with ships, by that road of which I spoke to you, You shall see it no more again; and there you shall be sold to your enemies for bondmen and bondwomen, and no man shall buy you" (*Devarim* 28:68). The return to Egypt in slave ships signifies a cancellation of the process of liberation, and practically speaking, a cancellation of the covenant with God. From here also follows the prohibition to return to Egypt (*Devarim* 17:16): "Since the Lord said to you, You shall henceforth return no more that way." See R. Yoel Bin-Nun, "*Derekh Eretz Pelishtim Mul Derekh Ha-Midbar Yam Suf*," *Megadim* 3 (5747),

Yirmiyahu creates between the punishment of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the punishment of those who will go down to Egypt teaches that the rejection of God's word regarding the arrival of the redemption and the desire to continue the exile are no less severe than the desire to preserve independence and refuse to surrender to Bavel against God's will.¹⁰

In the third stage, Yirmiyahu turns to the people as their representative, rather than as a prophet (19-22):¹¹

The Lord has said concerning you, O remnant of Yehuda: Do not go into Egypt: know certainly that I have forewarned you this day. For you have gone astray at peril of your lives, when you sent me to the Lord your God, saying: Pray for us to the Lord our God, and according to all that the Lord our God shall say, so declare to us, and we will do it. And now I have this day declared it to you; but you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord your God, nor anything for which He has sent me to you. Now therefore know certainly that you shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence, in the place where you desire to go and to sojourn.

The tone of Yirmiyahu's appeal rises up from this passage. "Do not go into Egypt." This is a last, desperate attempt to persuade them to back down from their desire to go down to Egypt. He opens with the words, "**Know certainly** that I have forewarned you this day,"¹² and concludes: "Now therefore **know certainly** that you shall die by the sword...." In other words, pay attention to the warning; do not ignore it! Yirmiyahu also reminds them about the absolute commitment they expressed to accept God's words, which was given only ten days earlier and turns out now to have been fraudulent: "For you have gone astray at peril of your lives."¹³

"You Speak Falsely"

With the conclusion of Yirmiyahu's moving and shocking speech, it becomes clear that his words have fallen on deaf ears (43:1-3):

pp. 21-32, and R. Mordechai Sabato, "*Ve-Heshivkha Hashem Mitzrayim Ba-Oniyot*," *Parashat Ki-Tavo*, VBM.

¹⁰ This can be likened to some extent to the connection between the the sin of the spies and the sin of the *ma'apilim*, the group that decided to proceed, alone and unauthorized, to *Eretz Yisrael*.

¹¹ This is what follows from the style of his words, as noted by the Malbim (ad loc.): "Thus far he informed them of the word of God; from now on the prophet speaks on his own."

¹² The phrase, "I have forewarned you this day," is found in various forms another four times in Scripture, always in the context of Moshe's words of warning to the people in the book of *Devarim*. Here there may also be a play on words: "Know" (*tede'u*)... "I have forewarned" (*ha'idoti*).

¹³ According to the Malbim, already from the outset they had no intention of staying in *Eretz Yisrael*: "'That the Lord your God may show us' (42:3) – they did not ask whether they should go to the land of Egypt or not, because they already decided to go to Egypt (41:7); they only asked that God should show them which way they should go to Egypt." It is, however, possible, that over the course of the ten days between the question and the answer, the people underwent a change.

And it came to pass that when Yirmiyahu had made an end of speaking to all the people all the words of the Lord their God, for which the Lord their God has sent him to them, all these words, then Azarya the son of Hoshaya and Yochanan the son of Kare'ach, and all the proud men, spoke, saying to Yirmiyahu: You speak falsely; the Lord our God has not sent you to say: Do not go into Egypt to sojourn there. But Barukh the son of Neriya sets you on against us, to deliver us into the hand of the Kasdim, that they might put us into Bavel.

Not only do they refuse to listen to him, contrary to their own declaration, but they accuse him of speaking falsely to them! Yirmiyahu is accused here with the same old accusation levelled against him by his opponents – that he is a false prophet who seeks the detriment of his people.¹⁴ The hope for a change in attitude towards him that arose at the beginning of the chapter is shattered before his eyes amid great fanfare. Once again, Yirmiyahu sees how his desperate warnings have gone unheard and how he is perceived as the enemy of the people.

Another bitter irony in these verses is found in the phrase, "You speak falsely." Gedalyahu had used a similar phrase to Yochanan the son of Kare'ach when Yochanan revealed Yishmael's plan to him (40:16): "For you speak falsely of Yishmael." Now Yochanan and his men cast the same groundless accusation at Yirmiyahu. The double appearance of the phrase reflects then the two errors in the story that led to the cancellation of any prospect of restoration: Gedalyahu's mistake regarding Yochanan's warning and Yochanan's mistake concerning Yirmiyahu's prophecy.¹⁵ This mistake is another mistake in the chain of mistakes on the part of the people, which cancels the possibility of restoring what is left of the people in their land.

The chapter concludes with the remnant of Yehuda going down to Egypt (4-7):

So Yochanan the son of Kare'ach, and all the captains of the forces, and all the people, did not obey the voice of the Lord, to dwell in the land of Yehuda. But Yochanan the son of Kare'ach and all the captains of the forces took all the remnant of Yehuda, that were returned from all nations into which they had been driven to dwell in the land of Yehuda; men, and women, and children, and the king's daughters, and every person that Nevuzar'adan the captain of the guard had left with Gedalyahu the son of Achikam the son of Shafan, together with Yirmiyahu the prophet and Barukh the son of Neriya. And they came

¹⁴ As mentioned earlier, it was precisely after the destruction that it became clear that Yirmiyahu's prophecies were true, and the ten day delay was yet another proof of this.

¹⁵ The people's claim against Yirmiyahu is a complicated one. They do not claim that he fabricated his words, but only that his scribe Baruch incited him. The skeptical attitude towards Barukh emerges already in the words of the princes to Barukh in the story of the scroll (36:17): "Tell us now, how did you write all these words at his mouth?" The princes apparently suspect that he inserted his own position into Yirmiyahu's words of prophecy. The complex status of Barukh is evident from the prophecy in chapter 45 as well. It is interesting that the Apocrypha bestowed upon Baruch the status of an independent prophet.

into the land of Egypt; for they did not obey the voice of the Lord; thus they came to Tachpanches.

The passage opens and closes with the statement that this action was done against the will of God: "Did not obey the voice of the Lord... for they did not obey the voice of the Lord"; and it describes the taking of the remnant of Yehuda "that were returned from all nations into which they had been driven" to Egypt. Yochanan's action is described as the practical continuation of the exile of Yehuda from the land, and ironically as the practical realization of Yishmael's plan.

In summation of the two *shiurim* dedicated to the assassination of Gedalyahu, I wish to cite from the conclusion of Uriel Simon's beautiful essay, "Gedalyahu's Assassination – Anatomy of Self-Destruction," which analyzes the failures of the three protagonists:¹⁶

The three protagonists of the story of self-destruction are: the assassin (Yishmael the son of Netanya), the victim (Gedalya the son of Achikam), and the heir (Yochanan the son of Kare'ach). The assassin was motivated by a combination of wretched ambition and fanatical loyalty to a political path, which, if it enjoyed a modicum of reasonableness prior to the destruction, afterwards was completely unrealistic. His short-term thinking did not allow him to anticipate the immediate consequences of the assassination (the counter-measures of the captains of the forces), or its long-term damage (the cessation of the return and restoration, the loss of the muscle of leadership, and the increased movement of those going out into exile). The total absence of moral restraints prevented him from understanding that political assassination, which dramatically shatters the taboo of the sanctity of human life, would lead to a terrible chain of bloodshed.

The victim had been forewarned against murder and the destruction of his enterprise, but his political-moral naiveté led to his undoing and the undoing all the people who were killed with him. *Chazal*, with their extreme moral sensibility, even pin to him the responsibility for the terrible consequences of this blunder: "Since he should have taken note of the advice of Yochanan the son of Kare'ach but did not do so, Scripture regards him as though he had killed them [the seventy people whose corpses were cast into the pit]" (*Nidda* 61a). Rava infers from here the following principle: "As to slander, though one should not believe it, one should nevertheless take note of it."

The heir, upon whose shoulders fell the responsibility for the fate of the remnant of Yehuda after the murder of Gedalya and the redemption of the prisoners, panicked because of his opponent's act of terror. He wisely sought the word of God from the mouth of Yirmiyahu, but lacked the strength to listen to it. His timidity, his irresoluteness, and his little faith made him a partner in the self-destruction, to which was added his

¹⁶ Uriel Simon, "The Murder of Gedalya – Anatomy of Self-Destruction" (Hebrew), in *Bakesh Shalom Ve-Radfehu*, pp. 224-225. Over the course of these *shiurim*, I have made use of Simon's analysis.

self-exile. In this way, Yochanan the son of Kare'ach realized the policy of abandoning the land advocated by his opponent Yishmael the son of Netanya, but instead of taking the remnant of Yehuda to the land of the children of Ammon, he took them to Egypt.

During the 2000 years of our exile, we were "merciful people, sons of merciful people," incapable of murder. But upon having returned to our land, we once again possess the tools, and our souls have the ability, to shed blood. The Fast of Gedalyahu is intended to enable us to look squarely at the horrors of the past, so that we can gather the strength to prevent them in the present.

(Translated by David Strauss)