

MATAN AL HAPEREK

A Renewed Meeting with Tanach

Yirmiyahu Perakim 17-18

Perek 17

The perek opens with harsh criticism given to the people of Yehuda who, in contrast to other nations who will one day forgo their foreign worship (16:9), have let idol worship become an intrinsic part of their identity (1-4). The perek's next section includes a series of psalms and reflections surrounding the topic of belief in God and divine justice (5-18). In the third and most central section of the perek (19-27), Yirmiyahu is commanded to publicize a prophecy about the city's failure to properly observe Shabbat by the gates of Yerushalayim.

- 1 a) “*Cursed is the man who trusts in mortals*” (5). In Pesukim 5-8, Yirmiyahu compares the fate of those who rely on man to those who rely on God. How do their fates differ? (A similar comparison is made in the first psalm of Tehillim, specifically in pasuk 6).
- b) **Radak:** This was said because Israel was placing their trust in Assyria and Egypt. *And turns his heart away from the Lord*—Because if he did not turn away from God, it would not be bad to rely on man to help him. His intention should be that with God's help, man can assist him.”

Upon which detail in the pasuk is Radak's commentary based? How does he use this detail to help define the sin?

- 2 “*Go and stand in the gate of the children of the people...and in all the gates of Yerushalayim*” (19). The gates of Yerushalayim are mentioned multiple times in this prophecy. Why is Yirmiyahu specifically commanded to pronounce his prophecy by the city gates? Refer to pesukim 21, 24, 25, and 27 to understand the role of the gates in the portrayal of the nation's sin.

- 3 The prophecy about Shabbat violation strongly resembles the prophecy of “*the temple of the Lord*” detailed in perek 7. The main difference between the two prophecies is that in perek 7, Yirmiyahu describes a wide variety of sins which correlate with the Ten Commandments, whereas here he focuses solely on Shabbat violation. Why do you think Yirmiyahu specifically stresses Shabbat and the public elements of its observance (eg. 19, 20, 25)? Take the unique description of Shabbat as a covenantal symbol in Shemot 31:16 and in Yechezkel 20:12-20 into consideration. (A parallel description appears in Nechemiah 13:15-18.)

Perek 18

The perek opens with a prophetic parable: Yirmiyahu is commanded to go to a potter’s shop and wait for the continuation of God’s message. The prophecy received in the potter’s shop is comprised of a parable (1-4) and its explanation (5-12) relating to the ethics of divine decrees. The perek continues with Yirmiyahu’s personal struggle with those who vehemently object to his prophecies. As we saw in perek 11 regarding his enemies from Anatot, here too the unbearable harassment and persecution incite Yirmiyahu to beg God not to forgive the nation’s sins.

- 4 The parable likens the molding of earthenware to the process of divine judgment. The finished vessel is subsequently ruined and the potter is forced to begin the creative process again. What is the meaning of this ‘accident,’ and what can it teach us about the relationship between God’s leadership and man’s fate?
- 5 The prophecy delivered in the potter’s shop further explicates God’s initial message to Yirmiyahu (1:10). Review the main idea of the inaugural prophecy and compare it to the explanation in this prophecy (7-10). What new idea is added by the ‘potter’s prophecy’?
- 6 “*They say, ‘Come let us devise schemes against Yirmiyahu’*” (18).
- a) How do Yirmiyahu’s oppressors perceive his prophecies of destruction and how do they treat him as a result? Compare God’s plan for the nation (11) with the plan devised by Yirmiyahu’s oppressors (18). What does this parallel suggest regarding the intention behind these plans? How does pasuk 18 support the central claim of Yirmiyahu’s enemies?
- b) How does Yirmiyahu’s view of himself and of his role (20-21) contrast with the nation’s perception of him?

Appendix

“Just as clay is in the hands of the potter”

Yirmiyahu’s prophecy in the potter’s shop is based on the image of Israel as the clay and God as the potter. This image was later used as the foundation for one of the most significant liturgical poems (*piyyut*) recited in Ashkenazic congregations on *Yom Kippur*. While the image in Yirmiyahu emphasizes the nation’s ability to repent and reverse divine decrees of destruction, the *piyyut* emphasizes the clay’s total dependence on the hands and creative whims of the potter. The *piyyut* closes with a plea which is recited at the height of the day’s judgment, “*Look to the covenant and ignore the Accuser.*”

*Like the clay in the hand of the potter-
he expands it at will and contracts it at will-
so are we in Your hand, O Preserver of kindness,
look at the covenant and ignore the Accuser.*

*Like the stone in the hand of the cutter-
he grasps it at will and smashes it at will-
so are we in Your hand, O Source of life and death,
look to the covenant and ignore the Accuser.*

*Like the ax-head in the hand of the blacksmith-
he forges it at will and removes it at will-
so are we in Your hand,
O Supporter of poor and destitute,
look at the covenant and ignore the Accuser.*

*Like the anchor in the hand of the sailor-
he holds it at will and casts it at will-
so are we in Your hand,
O good and forgiving God,
look to the covenant and ignore the Accuser.*

*Like the glass in the hand of the blower-
he shapes it at will and dissolves it at will-
so are we in Your hand,
O Forgiver of willful sins and errors,
look to the covenant and ignore the Accuser.*

*Like the curtain in the hand of the embroiderer-
he makes it even at will and makes it uneven at will-
so are we in Your hand,
O jealous and vengeful God,
look to the covenant and ignore the Accuser.*

*Like the silver in the hands of the silversmith-
he adulterates it at will and purifies it at will-
so are we in Your hand,
O Creator of cure for disease,
look to the covenant and ignore the Accuser.*

(Translation taken from the Artscroll Yom Kippur Machzor)

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