

MATAN AL HAPEREK

A Renewed Meeting with Tanach

Yirmiyahu Perakim 35-36

Perek 35

At the time when the Babylonian army reached Jerusalem in the days of Yehoyakim, Yirmiyahu is commanded to take action to demonstrate to the nation their sins. Yirmiyahu is told to go to the House of Rechav, a family of nomads who were in danger for their lives and who had escaped into the city, and to give them wine to drink. The Rechav family passes the test and declines the wine, and reveals to Yirmiyahu that the patriarch of the family, Yehonadav ben Rechav, who had lived 250 years previously, forbade them to settle the land and to drink wine. In contrast to the complete devotion of the Rechav family to the commandments of their father, stand the traitorous acts of Israel who transgress the commandments of God.

1 a) Yehonadav gave four commandments to his sons (6-10). Try to understand his reason for forbidding these actions.

b) The **Radak** suggests a reason for forbidding these actions. Read his commentary and note the difference between the reason for forbidding settling the land and the reason for forbidding drinking wine:

For houses and fields and vineyards keep a man in his place even in times of famine or war, and will cause him to die early from worrying, but if he is not tied to a place, any time that he sees it is good in this place he will stay and when he sees that it is bad he will go to another place which will be better for him. Therefore, he commanded them that they should be tent-dwellers and travel from place to place as they see fit, instead of having a house, field or vineyard, and thus they will live longer...And he forbade the drinking of

wine because it is known to cause one who overdoes it to be mad, as it says “*whoever is led astray by it is not wise*” (Mishlei 20:1) and it says, “*Who cries: 'Woe'? who: 'Alas'? who has contentions? who has raving? who has wounds without cause? who has redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine*” (Mishlei 23:29-30) And the first one who drank wine, even though he was a pious man, became drunk and was embarrassed.

2 Yehonadav ben Rechav is first mentioned in Melachim II (10:15-17) where he joined Yehu in destroying the house of Achav and the worship of Baal in the kingdom of Israel. What does this story teach us about Yehonadav? In light of what we have seen about Yehonadav, how can we understand the commandments to the sons of Rechav?

3 “*That you may live many days in the land wherein you sojourn*” (7) Yehonadav concludes his words by noting the purpose of the commandments.

a) Compare Yehonadav’s words to the words at the end of the parasha of “*And it shall come to pass, if you shall hearken*” (*Vehaya im Shamo’a*) – Devarim 11:21. The striking resemblance between the ending of the Parasha in Devarim – which deals with the connection between the behavior of the people and their staying on the land, and the purpose of Yehonadav ben Rechav’s commandments, strengthens the point we raised in question 2. In light of this, what is the ethical-religious angle which is concealed in the three commandments against settling the land?

b) The actions of the Rechav family are supposed to place a “mirror” in front of the people, to teach them a lesson – the sons of Rechav kept the commandments of their father, while you, Israel, are not keeping the commandments of God (14, 17). Besides the lesson learned from the very fact that the Rechav family has these commandments, can you find another lesson which is connected to the content and purpose of these commandments (as we understood them in questions 2 and 3a)?

Perek 36

In the fourth year of Yehoyakim's reign, the year that Nevuchadnezzar took the throne, Yirmiyahu is commanded to write down all of his prophecies, and this gives us a rare glimpse into the process of the writing of Sefer Yirmiyahu. Yirmiyahu asks Baruch ben Neryah the scribe to transcribe his prophecies and read them to the people in the Temple on the fast day which was set for the month of Kislev. From a Babylonian chronicle we learn that in that month Nevuchadnezzar conquered Ashkelon, and this act symbolized the beginning of the Babylonian conquest of the land of Israel. It may be that the fast day was set because of this event, making this an appropriate time to cause the nation to repent. However, while the words of Yirmiyahu are still ringing in the ears of the nation and their leaders, Yehoyakim remains rebellious, and tears and burns the scroll of prophecies.

4 “And it came to pass in the fourth year of Yehoyakim the son of Yoshiah, king of Judah...” (1) The perek opens by giving the time frame for the commandment to write the prophecies.

a) This time frame is mentioned as well in 25:1. Refer to the beginning of the prophecy there (25:1-7), and note the shared characteristics of the two prophecies.

b) The fourth year of Yehoyakim's reign was a turning point because of Nevuchadnezzar's rise to power and the growth of the Babylonian empire, which became a real threat to Judah. The enemy from the north, which was until then abstract, became a reality. In the light of these conditions – try to understand why the commandment to write down the prophecies comes now.

5 Yirmiyahu's scroll of prophecies is at the center of the perek. Follow what happens with the scroll, the repeated readings, and the development of its influence in different circles (pay attention to the repeated use of the verb k.r.a (to read)). Where does the circle of influence end and why? Pay attention to the play on words between kriaah with an alef and kriaah with an ayin in pesukim 21, 23 and 24 and to the insensitivity of the king as seen in the perek, for example in the detailed description of how he sits before the fireplace in the winter house in pasuk 22 (while the people stand in the Temple, fasting and praying!) and how he ignores the cries of the ministers in pasuk 25.

- 6 The description of the reading of the scroll to Yehoyakim is similar to another incident which happened to Yoshiyahu his father, which is described in Melachim II 22:8-13. Compare the parallel situation of reading the books to the kings, and pay attention to the role of Shafan the scribe to Yoshiyahu and the role of his descendants in our perek (pesukim 10, 11, 13, 25). Examine how the text contrasts between the reaction of Yehoyakim and the reaction of Yoshiyahu.

Appendix

The House of Rechav and Yitro

In Divrei HaYamim there is a pasuk which relates the Rechav family to the Kenites – the children of Yitro: *“And the families of scribes that dwelt at Yabez; the Tiratites, the Shimeatites, the Sucatites. These are the Kenites that came of Hammath, the father of the house of Rechav.”* (Divrei Hayamim I 2:55). This surprising fact about the family lineage is expanded in the midrash:

Just as Yitro was fond of the Torah, his sons after him were fond of the Torah, for God said to Yirmiyahu: *“Go unto the house of the Rechavites, and speak unto them, and bring them into the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers, and give them wine to drink...and I set before the sons of the house of the Rechavites goblets full of wine, and cups, and I said unto them: ‘Drink wine.’”* (35:1-5). Yirmiyahu said to them: God told me that you should drink wine. They said to him: our father commanded us not to drink wine the entire time that the Temple is destroyed, and though it is not yet destroyed he said to us that we should mourn for it as it is destined to be destroyed. And he told us not to anoint ourselves, not to cut our hair and not to live in houses, and we listened and we did everything that Yehonadav our father commanded us. Therefore they were called *“the Tiratites, the Shimeatites, the Sucatite.”* Tiratites – because they did not want to shave, Sucatites – because they did not want to anoint (s.o.ch.). Shimeatites – because they listened (sh.m.a.) to their father. Another explanation – Tiratites – because they heard the sound of the shofar (teruah) at Mount Sinai, or that they would blow the teruah when they prayed and be answered. Sucatites – for they lived in booths (Sukkot). Another explanation – Sucatites – they would screen and protect the people of Israel...

continued >

Come and see how pious were the sons of Yitro, for Yehonadav the son of Rechav heard from the prophet that the Temple was destined to be destroyed and he commanded his sons three decrees that they would not drink wine, and that they would not build houses and that they would not plant vineyards. And how did he know that abstaining from wine would bring longevity? For we know that four people were eager for land and were found inappropriate: Cayin, Noach, Lot and Uziyahu.

Rabbi Natan said: The covenant which the Holy One Blessed be He made with the sons of Yitro was greater than the covenant which he made with the sons of David. For the covenant which he made with David is not carved in stone but rather given on condition; as it says: *“If your children keep My covenant and My testimony that I shall teach them, their children also forever shall sit upon your throne.”* (Tehillim 132:12) But the covenant he made with Yehonadav ben Rechav was not made on condition, as it is written: *“therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: There shall not be cut off unto Yehonadav the son of Rechav a man to stand before Me forever”* (Yir 35:19).

Rabbi Shimon said: As the High Priesthood had already stopped, what is the meaning of the promise of *standing before God forever*, since the High Priesthood was already promised to another family? Rather it means that they will always have members sitting on the Sanhedrin (high court).

If we see that one who was from the nations of the earth and dealt with others from love, God returned to them from love, how much more so would that be true for someone from the nation of Israel.

(Free translation of the Mechilta deRabbi Shimon Bar Yochai 18)