

MATAN AL HAPEREK

A Renewed Meeting with Tanach

Yirmiyahu Perakim 37-38

Perek 37

Perakim 37-38 deal with the end of the days of the kingdom of Judah, when the Babylonian army is standing at the gates of Jerusalem. Two characters are central to the perakim: Yirmiyahu – who repeats again and again his prophecy that those left in the city must surrender to the Babylonians and save what can still be saved; and Tzidkiyahu, the last of the kings of Judah, who is described here in all his complexity, his indecision and political weakness. Tzidkiyahu's heart follows the words of the prophet, but his hands are tied by the opinions of his ministers. Perek 37 opens with a temporary respite from the siege on Jerusalem as a result of Pharaoh's coming to help the kingdom of Judah. Yirmiyahu takes advantage of the break in the siege to exit the city, but he is caught at the gate, accused of treachery and thrown in jail. When Tzidkiyahu gets involved, Yirmiyahu is taken out of jail and moved to the court of the guard.

- 1 With the lifting of the Babylonian siege on Jerusalem, Yirmiyahu leaves the city and is accused by a clerk by the name of Yeriya of defecting to the Babylonian side.

Try to understand why Yirmiyahu leaves the city. Pay attention to his destination and to the verb *lachalik* (to slip) which the text uses (12). Do you think that there is a connection between Yirmiyahu's prophecy at the beginning of the perek and his attempt to leave the city? Think of the situation which Yirmiyahu is in, when the Babylonians, about whom he has prophesied that they will burn the city and destroy it, now remove the siege.

See the words of the **Radak**:

For he was among the people, and he was afraid lest they put him in prison, as he said, “*For even if you had smitten the whole army of the Kasdim, etc.*” And the idea of “lachalik” is omission, i.e. he would have liked to be omitted from them.

- 2 “*And Tzidkiyahu the king sent, and took him out: and the king asked him secretly in his house...*” (17) After Yirmiyahu has sat in prison for a long period of time, Tzidkiyahu has a clandestine meeting with Yirmiyahu and asks for God’s word.

In the period during which Yirmiyahu was in prison in the house of Yehonatan the scribe an historical event occurred, which again causes a change in the attitude towards Yirmiyahu’s prophecies. Read Yirmiyahu’s words in pasuk 19 to understand what event this is and how it changed the attitude.

Perek 38

In Perek 38 we are in the midst of the second Babylonian siege on Jerusalem, which ends with the city being conquered and destroyed. Even at this point, Yirmiyahu continues to try to convince the people of Jerusalem to surrender to the Babylonians. In a way similar to the events of the previous perek, Yirmiyahu is accused of treachery and of lowering the morale of the troops. The ministers and the king sentence him to death, and throw Yirmiyahu into a pit full of mud, so that he should die there. In the last moments of his life, Yirmiyahu is saved by Eved-Melech the Kushi, and he attempts one last time to convince King Tzidkiyahu to recant and surrender. The King’s apprehensions outweigh the fact that he acknowledges the truth in what Yirmiyahu is saying – and he continues to rebel until the destruction of the city.

- 3 The sequence of events in perek 38 is parallel to the sequence of events in perek 37: The accusation of Yirmiyahu, the ministers throwing him in jail/the pit, being saved by the king, and afterwards a secret meeting between them. However, in perek 38 each stage is more extreme than the parallel one in perek 37:

a) What is the accusation against Yirmiyahu in each perek, and why is the accusation in our perek more severe? Why do you think that Yirmiyahu denies the first accusation (37:14: “*It is false; I am not deserting to the Kasdim.*”) while

in our perek he is silent? Pay attention to the objective of Yirmiyahu in his prophecy. What do the ministers think his objective is and how does Yirmiyahu see his objective?

b) Who punishes Yirmiyahu in each perek and what is the punishment? Refer to the involvement of the king and his role in the punishment of Yirmiyahu in perek 38, and think about why the king's consent to the punishment is missing in perek 37.

c) Consider the evolution of the meeting between the king and the prophet in the two perakim. What is the central point of each meeting? Pay attention to the difference between Yirmiyahu's answer in 37:17 in which he only supplies information to the king, and his answer in 38:17-23 in which he advises the king what he must do in order save the city and his life.

4 Central to perakim 37 and 38 is the character of Tzidkiyahu the king, with its positives and negatives. Consider the complexity of Tzidkiyahu's character which is revealed to us throughout the perakim through different views: his attitude toward Yirmiyahu's prophecies (37:2-3), his attitude toward Yirmiyahu himself, his indecisiveness (37:21, 38:5,10,16), his decision making processes, and the different pressures he is under (38:19,24-26). In conclusion: what are the factors in Tzidkiyahu's personality and in the political system to which he is bound which stopped him from preventing the destruction?

5 The description of the minister's attempt to kill Yirmiyahu in the pit reminds us of the brothers' attempt to kill Yosef in the pit (Bereshit 37:12-30).

a) Compare the two stories and look for the similarities between them: consider the context for the act – the misunderstanding of the intention of Yosef/ Yirmiyahu (Yirmiyahu -38:4; Bereshit – 37:14,18-20), the description of the throwing into the pit and the state of the pit (Yirmiyahu – 38:6, Bereshit 37:24), the helplessness of the one responsible in the story (Yirmiyahu – 38:5, Bereshit 37:21-22) the raising from the pit – pay attention that the one raising from the pit is a foreigner (Yirmiyahu – 38:12-13, Bereshit 37:28)

b) Why do you think the text draws the parallel between Yirmiyahu and Yosef? Pay attention to the role and general mission of Yosef and of Yirmiyahu, being at the interface of living in the land and leaving to exile, and to the attitude of those around them. Use this comparison to try to understand their being thrown in the pit – why did the ministers choose to kill Yirmiyahu specifically in this way? Consider what Reuven says in Bereshit 37:21-22.

Appendix

Yeriya son of Shelemya – And when he was in the gate of Binyamin, a sentry was there, whose name was Yeriya, the son of Shelemya, the son of Chananya; and he seized Yirmiyahu the prophet, saying, You are deserting to the Kasdim. (37:13)

Before you is a midrash which deals with the family connections of Yeriya son of Shelemya in our story. In the midrash, the Rabbis identified Yeriya who plots against Yirmiyahu as the grandson of Chananya ben Azur, the false prophet:

And it came to pass that when the army of the Kasdim had withdrawn from Jerusalem for fear of Pharaoh's army – Yirmiyahu left Jerusalem to go to Anatot to be with his brothers the priests, and he was leaving through the gate of Binyamin, and there was a man there whose job it was to watch those who entered and exited, and the man who oversaw those who came and went was Yeriya son of Shelemya, son of Chananya, son of Azur. [Chananya was] a false prophet who had misled the residents of Jerusalem [by saying] "Behold, the vessels of God's house will shortly be returned from Babylon" (27:16), don't be afraid. When Yirmiyahu heard him, he answered, "Amen! May your words come true and mine be nullified. I will gain [from it] and you will lose. I, a priest, will eat of the Temple [offerings], while you, a Givonite, will chop wood and draw water for the altar. Before you prophesy about the House of the Holy One, Blessed be He, prophesy about yourself - for this year you shall die and in the following year you shall be buried." When Chananya was about to die, he summoned his son Shelemya and said, "Know that Yirmiyahu cursed me. See how you can find a charge against him and be avenged." Shelemya searched but could find nothing. On his deathbed, he in turn called his son, Yeriya and told him, "See how you can find a charge against Yirmiyahu and be avenged on him for what he did to my father." When Yiriyah saw Yirmiyahu leaving through the gate of Benjamin, he seized Yirmiyahu and said to him: You are going out to the Kasdim to reconcile with them, Yirmiyahu said to him – you are lying, I am going to be with the priests. And he held him and took him to the ministers, and said this man is doing much damage to us, and I found him leaving the city to make peace with the Kasdim. The ministers became angry with him and hit him and put him in prison in the house of Yehonatan.

(Pesikta Rabati 26)