

# MATAN AL HAPEREK

## A Renewed Meeting with Tanach

### Yirmiyahu Perakim 39-40

#### Perek 39

Perek 39 describes the bitter end of Jerusalem, when after a prolonged siege of about a year and a half the walls are breached. Yirmiyahu's attempts to convince the nation to surrender, to accept the yoke of Babylonia and to save the city from destruction have been unsuccessful, and the city has fallen to the hands of the Babylonians. Yirmiyahu's prophecies have been fulfilled: the city, and within it the Temple, have been burnt and destroyed, the remainder of the residents of Jerusalem who were in the besieged city have been exiled to Babylonia, and Tzidkiyahu, who tried to escape the Babylonians, has been caught and punished cruelly. But even within the harsh description of the destruction we can see signs of hope: Nevuzaradan leaves a remnant of the nation under the authority of Gedalyahu ben Achikam (10), and by command of Nevuchadrezzar saves Yirmiyahu (11-14). The perek ends with a prophecy of rescue about Eved-Melech the Kushi who saved him from death in the mud pit which Yirmiyahu prophesied before the destruction, in the court of the guard (15-18).

- 1 Compare the date of the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem in our perek (2) to the date in the **Mishna Taanit 4:6** -

On the seventeenth of Tamuz, the Tablets were broken. The daily Tamid-offering was discontinued, a breach was made in the city wall, and Apostomos burned the Torah, and an idol was placed in the Temple.

This contradiction has been given different explanations by the two Talmuds. Pay attention to the fundamental difference between them and to the spiritual meaning of the answer which is brought in the Yerushalmi:

**Talmud Bavli Taanit 28b:** Was the city of Jerusalem breached on the Seventeenth of Tammuz? But it is written: *‘In the fourth month on the ninth of the month, and the famine became severe in the city’* and after that it is written: *‘and the city was breached’*. Rava said: This poses no difficulty, Here in the first Temple era, here in the second Temple era. As it was taught in a Baraita: In the first Temple era the city was breached on the ninth of Tammuz, in the second Temple era the city was breached on the seventeenth.

**Talmud Yerushalmi Taanit 4:5:** It is written: *‘on the ninth of the month the walls were breached’*, and this is what you say? Rabbi Tanchum bar Chinilai said: There is a miscalculation here...Like the parable of a king who is doing his accounts and they come to tell him that his son has been taken captive, and because of the troubling news he makes a miscalculation in his accounts. Afterwards he says: *‘Let this (miscalculation) become the head of the accounts’* (I.e. the basis of the accounting)

**The Korban Eidah (commentary on the Yerushalmi):** Because of all the troubles they erred in the calculation (of the date), and the text didn't want to change what they had agreed upon, as if to say *‘I am with you in your troubled time.’*

2 *And all the ministers of the king of Babylonia came in and sat in the middle gate’*  
(3)

a) Compare the description here to the description in Yirmiyahu's inaugural prophecy (1:15). What is the symbolic significance of the gentile kings sitting at the gates of Jerusalem? Remember the symbolic role of the gates of Jerusalem in the prophecies of Yirmiyahu (17:24-27, 22:1-5)

b) The parallel language used in the inaugural prophecy and in the description of the destruction in our perek appears also in the continuation of the perek. Compare the description in pasuk 5 with the description in 1:16. Focus on the phrase *‘to give judgment’* (*ledaber mishpat*) and pay attention to the parallel content of the judgment in the two descriptions. How does the inaugural prophecy enlighten us about the meaning of Nevuchadrezzar's actions and whom he *‘represents’* when he judges Tzidkiyahu?

## Perek 40

Perek 40 describes what happens among those left in the land after the destruction. The perek opens with the story of Yirmiyahu, who chooses to stay in the land after the destruction and join forces with Gedalyahu ben Achikam, who is appointed by the king of Babylonia over the meager group of people who are left in the land (1-6). Perakim 40-43 deal with the gloomy story of this group led by Gedalya, which was the hope for reconstruction after the destruction; a hope which disappeared with the murder of Gedalya.

- 3 The story of Yirmiyahu after the destruction (1-6), is inconsistent with the description which appeared in the previous perek (39:11-14). Look at both descriptions and note the differences between them. Refer to the commentaries of **Rashi** and **Radak**, and note the relationship between the two descriptions according to each one of the commentators:

**Rashi:** from Ramah (40:1): Where he went into exile by himself with them. He would see a group [of youths] joined by a collar and would put his neck between them, and Nevuzaradan would come and take it off of them [as is stated in Pesikta deRav Kehana 13]. For it is impossible to say that Nevuzaradan put him in chains since Nevuchadnezzar commanded him, “*Do him no harm*” (39:12).

**Radak:** and they sent and took Yirmiyahu (39:14): This pasuk tells the story of what happened in the end, because before they gave him to Gedalyahu, Nevuzaradan spoke to him, for he found him in exile in chains like all the rest of the exiles whom the Kasdim had chained when they came into the city, for they did not know of the commandment about Yirmiyahu because Nevuchadnezzar had given it to Nevuzaradan. And what is said ‘*from the court of the guard*’ means to say that that is the place which the captors took him from, for he was there until the day that Jerusalem was captured, as is written above. And it says about Yirmiyahu that the captors took him from the court of the guard along with the rest of the exiles and gave him to Gedalyahu, Nevuzaradan and the rest of the ministers of the king.

- 4 After Nevuzaradan freed Yirmiyahu from his chains he gave him the choice to go into exile in Babylonia – where most of the nation would be concentrated – or to remain in Israel with the meager group of people who were left in the land. Why does Yirmiyahu get this preferred status? Look at Nevuzaradan's words in pesukim 2-3. Try to understand what lead Yirmiyahu, the prophet of destruction and exile, to choose to stay in the land? See pesukim 11-12.
- 5 The king of Babylonia appoints Gedalyahu ben Achikam ben Shafan over the people who remain in the land. Pay attention to the description of Gedalyahu in our perek (9-10, 13-16) and see what we know about Gedalyahu's family tree:
- Achikam, his father, one of the ministers of Yoshiyahu, saves Yirmiyahu from the people and the priests in 26:24 and Melachim II 22:12.
  - Shafan, his grandfather, Yoshiyahu's scribe, reads the Sefer Torah before Yoshiyahu in Melachim II 22:3.
  - Another son of Shafan, Gemaryahu, is counted as one of the ministers of Yehoyakim who is fearful of God in perek 36.

How does this information help to explain the choice of the king of Babylonia, and Yirmiyahu's choice as well?

## Appendix

*'And the Kasdim burned the king's house, and the houses of the people, with fire, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem.'* (39:8)

Dramatic evidence of the heat of the battle and the fire which burnt the houses of Jerusalem has been found by archeologists in several places, one of them being the Royal Quarter (Area G) in the City of David. Tens of iron and bronze arrowheads that were found there are a testament to the last moments of the fight. The tragic end is seen in a thick layer of ash and in the sooty walls which were found in all of the buildings in the area. In one house there were extra signs of destruction – in the 'burnt room' the archeologists found an entire house which had collapsed inward from the force of the fire. The flames kindled the ceiling which was made of timber and it collapsed along with the

second floor. Everything crashed mightily into the center of the house. The scene that was left was a 90cm-high pile of stones with a layer of ash under it. Under this debris the excavators found the remains of sooty walls, all of the household items smashed, and parts of wooden furniture, the first find of this kind from this period in Israel. Within the wreckage of Jerusalem were found those items which the prophets warned would cause the destruction to come. The amount of broken pottery figurines in the City of David in general, and specifically in the buildings from the period of the 8th century BCE and on, is amazing. Nearly 1500 broken figurines were discovered in the City of David alone, and in the greater Jerusalem area the numbers reach thousands, a large number even in relation to other sites. Yirmiyahu's struggle with the idolatry which had become deep-rooted in the Judean culture finds concrete expression in these figurines, as the Rabbis said: 'The first Temple in Jerusalem – why was it destroyed? Because of the idol worship, incest and bloodshed which were in it' (Tosefta Minachot 13:22)

The command to demolish the walls of the city which had rebelled time after time against Babylonia was meant to remove any possible military capability. The results were devastating. The entire eastern wing of the city sat on ancient terraces which were built into the eastern slope of the city, each resting on the fill of the one below it, with the bottom terrace, which was the strongest and supported them all, being the walls of the city. After the walls of the city were demolished, the winter rains washed the fill from the terraces and the houses of the city began to collapse causing avalanches of stone on the houses below them. The destruction was so great that the area was never again included as part of the city. This is the destruction which is lamented in Eicha: *'The Lord has purposed to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion; he has stretched out a line, he has not withdrawn his hand from destroying; therefore he made the rampart and the wall to lament; they languish together.'* (Eicha 1:8)

Free translation from The City of David, Aharon Horowitz, pp. 252-253