

MATAN AL HAPEREK

A Renewed Meeting with Tanach

Yeshayahu Perakim 17-18

Perek 17

The prophecy recorded in perek 17 was most likely delivered following the alliance established between Aram and Israel during the reign of Pekach ben Remalyahu (refer back to perek 7). In this prophecy, Yeshayahu describes the complete destruction of Damascus, the capital city of Aram, along with the destruction of the Northern Kingdom. The perek ends on a slightly more positive note (pesukim 12-14): Yeshayahu prophesies the collaboration of the gentile nations for war and their miraculous defeat by God as restitution for their cruel treatment of Israel.

- In pesukim 5-6 the prophet utilizes two agricultural images to describe the destruction brought upon Israel and Aram: the wheat farmer and the olive harvester. These images are based upon two commandments in the Torah: *Leket* and *Olelot*, both of which refer to the commandment to leave over the produce that falls aside during the harvest for needy gleaners (Vayikra 19:9-10). The image of the 'leftover crops' (*olelot*) relates to the concept of the small group of survivors who will be saved from destruction and serve as the seed of the rejuvenated nation (refer back to 6:13 and 10:20). The leftover crops are also mentioned in Yirmiyahu's prophecies delivered on the brink of national destruction (6:9, 49:9). Discuss the differences between this image in the prophecies of Yeshayahu and Yirmiyahu. What do these differences reflect about the style of each prophet?

- 2 a) In pesukim 7-8 Yeshayahu discusses the spiritual consequences of the destruction. The roots “to do” and “to regard”, words which are phonetically related in the original Hebrew [עשה/שעה], are repeated five times. Note the presence and repetition of these words and discuss their contextual significance.
- b) In pesukim 9-10 Yeshayahu continues his prophecy and utilizes a play on words [לשון נופל על לשון] with the words “strong” and “forsake” [which are phonetically related in the original Hebrew: מעוז/עזב]. Note the use of each word and discuss their contrasting contexts.

Perek 18

The prophecy in chapter 18 is difficult and cryptic. It seems that this prophecy hints to the relationship between King Chizkiyahu and the King of Ethiopia (Kush) during the period of Assyria’s advance. The prophecy opens with a request made to the messengers of Ethiopia arriving in Israel on powerful ships. The prophet informs the messengers of the divine war against Assyria and vividly describes Assyria’s downfall.

- 3 The mission of Ethiopia’s messengers is mentioned at the beginning (2) and end (7) of this prophecy. Where are the messengers sent in both references and what is their mission? What is the connection between these two missions?

Appendix

The “Survivors” in the Prophecies of Yeshayahu

In perek 17 Yeshayahu prophesies a harsh prophecy of destruction to the nation of Israel: “*In that day, the mass of Jacob shall dwindle and the fatness of his body become lean...only gleanings shall be left of him, as when one beats an olive tree: Two berries or three on the topmost branch, four or five on the boughs of the crown*” (17:4-5). Yeshayahu compares the destruction to grape and wheat harvests after which few leftover crops remain on the trees. The description of a destruction which will leave few survivors behind repeats itself many times throughout Yeshayahu’s prophecies and is one of the main motifs of the entire book.

In the book's opening prophecy, Yeshayahu alludes to the similarities between the forthcoming destruction and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, however, he emphasizes that there will be a small group of survivors left behind: "**Fair Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a but in a cucumber field, like a city beleaguered. Had not the Lord of Hosts left us some survivors, we should be like Sodom and Gomorrah**" (1:8-9). In Yeshayahu's inaugural prophecy he also mentions these survivors: "**But while a tenth part yet remains in it, it shall repent. It shall be ravaged like the terebinth and the oak, of which stumps are left even when they are felled: its stump shall be a holy seed**" (6:13). This pasuk includes another image of flora: a small stump which will give rise to a new tree. In this prophecy, the survivors are called "a holy seed." The holiness of these survivors is mentioned in other prophecies of Yeshayahu as well: "**And those who remain in Zion and are left in Yerushalayim; All who are inscribed for life in Yerushalayim shall be called holy**" (4:3).

Yeshayahu describes the destruction as a refinement process which will leave behind a small group of worthy, holy survivors who will form the foundation of the new and improved nation. This unique image is also mentioned at the beginning of Yeshayahu's vision of the End of Days in perek 11: "**Lo! The Sovereign Lord of Hosts; Will hew off the tree-crowns with an ax: the tall ones shall be felled, the lofty ones cut down... The Lebanon trees shall fall in their majesty. But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Yishai, a twig shall sprout from his stock**" (10:33-11:1). In contrast to the destruction of Assyria which will not leave any hope for rehabilitation, the destruction of Israel will leave behind a small "shoot" which will revive and redeem the Jewish nation and the entire world.

The idea of the 'survivors' is connected to another central idea in the book of Yeshayahu. In many of his prophecies, Yeshayahu emphasizes that the source of all sin is human pride. Opulence and prestige cause people to feel haughty and abandon God. Leaving behind worthy survivors is paralleled to the cutting down of a tall tree and leaving behind only a small stump. This refinement process will lessen man's confidence in himself and limit his reliance on his own powers, enabling a process of renewal and return to God: "**And on that day, the remnant of Israel and the escaped house of Jacob shall lean no more upon him that beats it, but shall lean sincerely on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. Only a remnant shall return, only a remnant of Jacob, to Mighty God**" (10:20-21). The phrase "a remnant shall return" is the essence of this idea. The refined remnant that learns how to not rely on human strength will eventually reconnect with God. In light of this, it is not surprising that Yeshayahu's firstborn is named "a remnant shall return" [ארם].