

# MATAN AL HAPEREK

## A Renewed Meeting with Tanach

### Yeshayahu Perakim 46-47

#### Perek 46

One of the most wonderful prophetic phrases appears in our chapter; it describes the eternal relationship between God and the Jewish people *"Till you grow old, I will still be the same; when you turn gray, it is I who will carry; I was the Maker, and I will be the Bearer; and I will carry and rescue [you]"* (46:4). This phrase was embedded in the conclusion of the *tefilla* right after *Aleynu L'shabeach*. The prophecy itself is a direct continuation of the previous prophecy in chapter 45. At the beginning of the prophecy the prophet addresses the Babylonian idol-worshippers (1-2); and describes their flight from Cyrus, king of Persia, together with Bel and Nebo, the main Babylonian gods. Next, the prophet addresses the 'House of Israel', and contrasts the futility of the Babylonian gods, which is evident from the flight of their worshippers who carry them on their shoulders, with the paternal attitude of God towards His people.

- ❶ *'Bel is bowed, Nebo is covering, their images are a burden for beasts and cattle; the things you would carry [in procession] are now piled as a burden on tired [beasts].'* The main motif in pesukim 1-4 is of carrying [in original Hebrew נשיאה] utilized in the roots נש"א, עמ"ס, סב"ל, מל"ט. Contrast these verbs in the way they are utilized to describe both the relationship between the gods and their worshippers (1-2), and the relationship between God and Israel (3-4).
- ❷ In the background of the description of Israel being carried by God we find another simile; the simile of pregnancy and birth. In what way does this simile deepen our understanding of God's unique relationship with Israel? Note the pesukim in Devarim 1:31 and in Tehillim 22:11.

## Perek 47

In continuation to chapter 46, which depicted the fall of the Babylonian gods as a result of it being conquered by Cyrus; our chapter deals with the political fall of Babylonia, and includes a harsh and scornful prophecy towards the *Maiden Babylon*. This prophecy foresees its fall from on high as the largest empire in the world, to rock bottom. The first section of the prophecy includes various descriptions which express this extreme change in Babylonia's status (1-7). In the second section the prophet focuses on the Babylonian magicians and astrologers (8-15). We saw in the previous chapter that the prophet ridiculed the futility of the Babylonian gods, who could not save Babylonia nor themselves; while in our chapter he ridicules the Babylonian magicians, whose wisdom could not save them either.

- 3 In the beginning of the prophecy the prophet address the *Maiden Babylon* and commands her to perform several actions in order to express her inferior political state.
  - a) '*Get down, sit in the dust, Fair Maiden Babylon...*' What does the dethroning of *Maiden Babylon* and her sitting in silence in the dust express in pesukim 1, 5? Note the description in Eicha 2:10.
  - b) '*Grasp the handmill and grind meal*'. What does the grinding of the handmill tell us about Babylonia's position? See Shoftim 16:21. Also reflect on the shame and humiliation which are interwoven in the actions mentioned in pesukim 2-3.
- 4 In pesukim 6-8 the prophet specifies the two sins of *Maiden Babylon*. Discuss the connection between her sins and the retributions which were imposed on her.
- 5 The prophet describes the root of Babylonia's sins in the continuation of the chapter, and concentrates on its advanced magical and astrological wisdom; which was its source of pride in ancient times: '*It was your skill and your science that led you astray.*'  
See pesukim 8-10 and consider how (paradoxically) this wisdom lead to the downfall of Babylonia, both on a moral and political level. Note the contrasting phrases of: '*I am, and there is none but me*' (47:8; 47:10) and '*For I am God, and there is none like Me*' (46:9).

## Appendix

### 'Let them be as chaff in the wind'

Yeshayahu's prophecies served as the background for various poems, amongst them R' Yisrael of Najara's poem called 'Let them be as chaff in the wind'.

The prophecies in this section of Yeshyahu, which are directed at the Babylonian exiles, who are entrenched amongst the idol worshippers, include many disputes with the gods and their worshippers and a variety of scornful phrases. The prophet emphasizes time and again the deep chasm between the pagan gods and the God of Israel. These prophecies serve as the background for R' Yisrael of Najara's poem 'Let them be as chaff'. Interwoven in this poem are various pesukim from Sefer Yeshyahu which speak of the pagan gods, especially those from chapter 46.

R' Yisrael of Najara compares and contrasts God, a living god, with the pagan gods; this is done with an ironic and scornful feeling, with a smug smile. In this manner he describes the idol worshipper who carries his god in his bosom and ties him to a rope to prevent him from falling... The idol is physically very similar to his owner; however, at times of distress they are far apart. God, on the other hand, who is at an infinite distance from man, is the God who is *near to all who call Him*; He who is attentive and responds to those in trouble.

The poem opens with the word *chaff* [in original Hebrew מוץ]- which has no real existence or actuality; it is lifted up as dust in the wind. The poem ends with the word *blossom* [in original Hebrew ציץ], which is now wilted, but has begun to bud and blossom; it symbolizes the blossoming of the redemption of the people of Israel. Its present, within which the poet lives, is indeed wilted; the nation is in exile, however, praised be he that believes in a living God. This living God will, in the future, cause His nation and His land to blossom once more. The blossom reminds us of another one of Yeshayahu's prophecies, a prophecy which describes the Messiah, the redeemer, depicted as a shoot and branch; which sprouts from the cut off stump, describing the people of Israel in exile. This shoot, too, is actually a blossom, which blooms and heralds the redemption:

*"But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse, a twig shall sprout from his stock. The spirit of the Lord shall alight upon him: a spirit of wisdom and insight, a spirit of counsel and valor, a spirit of devotion and reverence for the Lord. He shall sense the truth by his reverence for the Lord: he shall not judge by what his eyes behold, nor decide by what his ears perceive. Thus he shall judge the poor with equity and decide with justice for the lowly of the land. He shall strike down a land with the rod of his mouth and slay the wicked with the breath of his lips. Justice shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his waist. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together, with a little boy to herd them."* (11: 1-6)

[Chana Petaya, *Hazmana L'Piyut*. <http://www.piyut.org.il/articles/420.html>]

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